

Desolate Era

(莽荒纪)

Book 43

Final Fate

I Eat Tomatoes

(我吃西红柿)

Story Description:

Fate had never been kind to Ji Ning. Wracked by illnesses and infirm his entire life on Earth, Ning knew early on that he would die as a teenager. What he didn't know was that there really was such a thing as life after death, and that the multiverse was a far larger place than he thought. A lucky twist of fate (one of the few in Ning's life) meant that Ning was reborn into a world of Immortals and monsters, of Ki Refiners and powerful Fiendgods, a world where Dynasties lasted for millions of years. A world which is both greater...and yet also smaller... than he ever could imagine. He would have the opportunity to join them, and in this life, Ning swore to himself, he would never let himself be weak again! The Era he was born into was a Desolate one, but Ning would make it his era.

Original Story can be found here: [Link](#)

Chapter 1: Sealed Away?

A dazzlingly beautiful and fragrant meadow. A barefoot, gray-robed man was seated in the lotus position here. He reached out to gently pluck a flower, then closed his eyes to sniff it. A gentle yet infectious smile appeared on his face which affected even the nearby Exalt Bowenya. This caused the latter to feel an even-greater sense of awe.

“You handled this matter very poorly,” Iyerre said while continuing to enjoy the flower’s fragrance.

“I made a mistake. I was too desperate for glory,” Bowenya said rather nervously.

Iyerre stared raptly at the flower before him, as though he wanted to memorize every millimeter of it. “Your hunger for glory and your unwillingness to share it resulted in you not notifying me about this until the very last moment, when the Daoguard Tower itself was about to be destroyed. In other words, you only reported it when you were out of options. You didn’t give me enough time at all.”

Bowenya was silent. He didn’t dare to say a word, especially since Iyerre was correct. He had indeed waited until the situation was quite grim, with Ning ripping his way through spacetime and charging towards the heart of the tower.

Iyerre didn’t have enough time to fully prepare a counter-plan, and so his only choice had been to send in a servitor who he thought would have the highest chance for success.

“Losing a servant is a minor matter,” Iyerre continued, “But I’m concerned that the local Autarchs will discover that our heartlands have not been truly sealed by them.”

“Impossible. They won’t be able to discover anything. We didn’t make any mistakes at all,” Bowenya said hurriedly.

“I sent over a servant and tore a dimensional tunnel for it and you to traverse. This created a dimensional ripple,” Iyerre said. “It was thanks to

this ripple that Autarch Titanos and Autarch Mogg were able to enter the dimension and slay my servitor.”

“I acted to mislead Daolord Darknorth,” Bowenya said. “I made sure that he thought I fled out of fear while unleashing the creature being suppressed by my Daoguard Tower. It all fits together perfectly. There were no mistakes made at all.”

Iyerre nodded slightly. If certain secrets were revealed, their chances at victory during the final battle would be lessened. The most important secret, of course, was the existence of himself – Iyerre! Thankfully, this wouldn’t be a problem so long as he didn’t accidentally reveal himself. Everyone who had met him and knew of his identity had been forced to swear lifeblood oaths. They couldn’t even mention him in the most oblique of ways!

Ning had reviewed the memories of many Hegemons and Emperors, but he knew nothing at all of the supreme leaders of the Sithe invasion. He knew that the Sithe had a Lord of Chaos, but the Sithe Chaoslord was a transcendent figure that could be described as truly invincible, even in all the Infinite Void.

He wouldn’t be so foolish as to actually enter Ning’s Chaosverse, because once he did he would lose his connection to the Chaosverse he controlled. Not only would he be dramatically weakened, he would also be suppressed by this Chaosverse. If enough things went wrong, he could theoretically be killed here! However, so long as he avoided other Chaosverses he would be completely invincible. Thus, the Autarchs of Ning’s Chaosverse felt certain that the Sithe Chaoslord would never come here in person.

All that aside... the fact that the Sithelands had not truly been sealed away was another extremely important secret! The seals which the cultivator Autarchs had placed over the Sithelands were so powerful that the Autarchs felt that if the Sithe wished to escape, they would have to fight their way through. As a result, the cultivator civilizations entered an era of peace, with just Autarch Mogg and the avatars of Autarchs remaining behind to keep a watch over things here.

In reality, however, Iyerre was able to open dimensional tunnels to the outside world with ease. The tunnel he had established to send out his servant and bring Bowenya back was proof of this... which meant that the entire Sithe army was capable of slipping out without anyone being the wiser!

“There were still a few gaps in our masquerade which might be discovered.” Iyerre glanced sideways at Bowenya. “We didn’t have enough time, and I really did want to kill Daolord Darknorth and swallow his truesoul.”

“I was at fault,” Bowenya said immediately.

“However... I don’t think the cultivators will be able to notice them,” Iyerre said calmly. “Either way, the fact that this Chaosverse has given birth to someone who has mastered an Eternal Omega Dao means that we’ll need to launch the final war sooner than anticipated! If we wait for too long, this Chaosverse might give birth to an Omega Autarch, in which case we’ll truly be finished. You can make up for your mistakes once the war begins.”

“Understood,” Bowenya said. Iyerre then waved his hand, causing Bowenya to disappear without a trace. The meadow remained as calm and tranquil as ever. The only beings here aside from Iyerre were a few ordinary animals.

“Last time, I saw that the tide was turning against us so I feigned weakness and allowed you to ‘seal’ us here,” Iyerre murmured softly. “I’ve waited and prepared for a very long time. This time, I understand you far better than I did in the past. I’m definitely going to win.

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Immediately after Ji Ning sent off the Paragon of Pills and the others, Autarch Mogg’s face turned grave. “Let’s go back into the hidden dimension,” he said, then teleported Ning and Autarch Titanos inside once more.

The three of them stood in midair within the Sacred Realm, staring at the distant Daoguard Tower. The entire Sacred Realm looked as though it

had been through hell and back. The ground was filled with craters and crevices, a testament to the earlier battle that had rocked this place.

“It’s been ruined.” Autarch Mogg stared at the distant Daoguard Tower. “The dimensional control formations have been wrecked. This Daoguard Tower can no longer be used to monitor the surrounding area, nor can it be used to activate the dimensional teleport function which was used to capture cultivators.”

“The dimensional formation has been destroyed?” Ning was startled. The grand formation which had captured him was formed by a combination of nine mighty dimensional formation-bases. When it had activated, Ning had been teleported straight to this hidden dimension.

“The Sithe definitely arranged for guards to watch over those nine formation-bases,” Autarch Mogg said. “Once we took over this hidden dimension, they moved to destroy the formation-bases to avoid us making use of them.”

“If they’ve been destroyed, they’ve been destroyed. This hidden dimension is useless to us cultivators,” Autarch Titanos said with a smile. His gaze suddenly turned towards the devastated landscape. He frowned: “Mogg, did you have the feeling that the creature we fought against was much more troublesome than usual?”

Autarch Mogg blinked, then nodded. “It really was a handful.”

“Exalt-class Daoguard Towers generally don’t suppress creatures of such strength,” Autarch Titanos said. “As I recall, the previous ones we dealt with I could kill within just four or five palm strikes. This time, the two of us had to work together to fight for quite some time before it died. During the Dawn War, it wasn’t until the very end that the Sithe released creatures of such power.”

“This secret dimension was used to spy on the outside world. It was probably quite special to the Sithe, which was why they stationed a particularly powerful creature here,” Autarch Mogg said.

“Possible, I suppose.” Autarch Titanos nodded. “We’ve always felt certain that the Sithe were completely sealed away, especially since we’ve taken

full control over the outer perimeter of the Sithelands. I never would've imagined that such an enormous dimension could've been hidden from us for so long! If they weren't so desperate to get rid of Darknorth, we probably would've never discovered it."

Autarch Mogg frowned. "I've been standing guard over this place for countless aeons, but I never noticed it."

"That's why I'm worried. How many other secrets are the Sithe hiding?" Autarch Titanos frowned as well.

"Hahaha... we've completely locked away the Sithe heartlands. If they made it out, I'd definitely notice," Autarch Mogg said with a chuckle. "It doesn't really matter if a few Sithe are hiding in the outside world. How many of them could there be?"

Autarch Titanos nodded as well. All of the Autarchs had worked together to forge those seals over the Sithe heartlands. They felt quite confident in its efficacy.

Ning simply gazed at the world around him. This was very important, but with his truesoul crumbling away the most important thing for him to do was to use his remaining years to create the 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique. There was no way he could take part in any battle against the Sithe.

"Gentlemen," Ning said, "As you know, I acquired the [Five Truncheon Chapters]. This is something which would be tremendously beneficial to the entire cultivator civilization. I acquired it from Hawkefang after I entered the Sacred Realm! I promised him that I would guarantee a peaceful life for the countless Sithe descendants who lived here."

"That's easy. I have to admit, Hawkefang did something incredible for us. I'll give them an otherverse of their own," Autarch Mogg said with a smile. "An otherverse will be more than enough for all of them to reside within."

"I feel sorry for them. The Sithe clearly don't care about them at all; they treat them as pawns to be sacrificed." Ning shook his head and sighed. Suddenly, he frowned and his face turned pale. "Wait a second!"

RWX's Thoughts

This is the twelfth and final chapter for the week! Btw - how many of you have tested out the new 'bookmarks' function? We've been steadily overhauling it and it is super awesome. Go try it out!

Book 43 is the third-to-last book in this 45 book series. We're very, very close to the end now...

Chapter 2: Mistake

The avatars of Autarch Titanos and Autarch Mogg turned to stare at Ji Ning, puzzled.

“That great tree was clearly capable of exhausting me to death... so why did Bowenya immediately flee upon releasing it?” Ning added, “And when you fought against it, it showed that it was sentient and capable of rational thought. It wasn’t like those other insane prisoners. It followed Bowenya’s orders to continue assaulting me even though the two of you were destroying it. I doubt it would’ve accidentally injured Bowenya... so why did he flee?”

Autarch Mogg hesitated momentarily. “Perhaps... since this was his final trump card, he felt rather nervous because you defeated all his previous ones? As a result, he fled immediately after using it, to avoid you exceeding his expectations once more and making it impossible for him to flee.”

“Darknorth, what are you suggesting?” Autarch Titanos asked.

“There’s some sense to Autarch Mogg’s explanation,” Ning said, “But Autarchs... what you don’t realize is that after I entered the Sacred Realm, I had to first deal with a combined attack from 2,800 Hegemons and Emperors, then had to deal with two Daoguard Towers which broke free from their foundations to assault me. The Sithe were clearly willing to pay an enormous price to try and kill me. If you were Bowenya and had access to such a powerful tree-creature, how would you employed it against me?”

Ning shook his head, then continued in a low voice, “If I was Bowenya, I would’ve sent the tree to attack before the 2,800 Hegemons did. The giant tree could’ve completely surrounded the dimensional trap, giving me nowhere to run. They could’ve surrounded and killed me with ease.”

“That tree was clearly sentient and clear-minded. There was no reason to wait that long before employing it. Why sacrifice a pair of Daoguard Towers and thousands of Hegemons and Emperors before releasing it?” Ning said. “Losing that many Hegemons and Emperors... even if he would

still be rewarded, the rewards would've been reduced."

"Most importantly of all... in the Sacred Realm, I meditated and trained on multiple occasions for extended periods of time. In fact, I even pretended that I would rather wait for death than actually enter the Daoguard Tower. Bowenya's response? He said that he would rather watch me die outside than take the risk of fighting me." Ning frowned. "If he had that tree at his disposal, why would he have chosen to just watch as I died of natural causes?"

Mogg and Titanos both blinked. They didn't know all the details of what Ning had experienced in this hidden dimension, but upon hearing this they too began to feel that something was off.

That great tree had been an intelligent, sentient being which was under orders to kill Ning no matter what. Given how powerful and obedient it was, why not use it earlier? Why flee immediately after using it, instead of continuing to watch over things from within the Daoguard Tower?

The giant tree was extremely powerful and possessed tremendous amounts of vital energy. It was perfect for dealing against a failed Daolord like Ning! Unless Bowenya was a complete fool, he should've known early on that the tree would be a perfect counter for 'Daolord Darknorth'... but he refused to use it. He waited until all of his other resources were used up and until his Daoguard Tower was at the brink of collapse before using it.

Why?

He would've rather watched Ning train from his position within the Daoguard Tower, waiting for Ning's truesoul to naturally collapse instead of releasing that creature. Why?

"Unless..." Ning's eyes flashed with a cold, hard light: "Unless that tree originally wasn't here."

"Wasn't here?" Autarch Mogg and Autarch Titanos both narrowed their eyes.

"It wasn't here... which was why Bowenya was unable to do anything to me. I trained for multiple chaos cycles, and all he could do was watch! If

the tree had been here this entire time, there would've been no reason for him not to use it," Ning said. "He waited until I was at the verge of conquering his Daoguard Tower. He probably grew desperate, at which point he begged the Sithe commanders for help, and they sent over that tree-creature in response."

"So where did the great tree come from?" Autarch Titanos said heavily.

"One of the formation-bases? Another hidden dimension, perhaps? Or..." An ugly look appeared on Autarch Mogg's face: "Did it perhaps come from the Sithe heartlands?"

Mogg and Titanos shared a worried glance. The two of them had learned much of the Sithe's capabilities during the Dawn War. Creatures like the giant tree would've definitely been classified among the most powerful of Sithe war assets. They were even more important than Sithe Exalts!

They didn't really want to believe it, but... it now seemed that the likeliest explanation was that it really did come from the heartland regions of the Sithelands!

"But we've already locked the Sithe heartlands away," Autarch Mogg muttered irresolutely. "Even if they came out, I should've been able to sense something."

"Too much time has gone past. The Sithe were probably able to devise a way to avoid the seals without us noticing," Autarch Titanos said heavily. "They are superior to us in so many areas."

"Darknorth, thank you for informing us." Autarch Titanos turned to look at Ning. "We didn't suspect a thing at all. Once the next war begins, the Sithe would've been able to slip out with us none the wiser. We would've continued to stand guard over this place while they assaulted the rest of the Chaosverse. We would've been caught completely flat-footed."

"Autarchs, you only arrived at the very end to rescue me and so you didn't know the details of what happened here. It was only when I reflected on all the things that occurred since my arrival into that hidden dimension that I realized that the way Exalt Bowenya employed the great tree made no sense at all," Ning said. "It was my pity for the Sithe

descendants that led me to realize something was wrong.”

“Mm.” Titanos and Mogg both had extremely serious looks on their faces.

“Although other explanations are possible and we can’t be completely sure that the tree-creature came from the Sithe heartlands,” Autarch Mogg said, “I’d say there is a better than 50% chance of it being the case.”

“It’s possible that our seal has been rendered useless, if it was even effective to begin with,” Autarch Titanos agreed. “It seems we need to start preparing.”

Iyerre didn’t make any ‘mistakes’ in sending the great tree to kill Ning per se, but it clashed with Bowenya’s previous words and actions. If Bowenya had access to the great tree all along, why would he have needed to turtle up for so long? Why would he rather wait and watch as Ning’s truesoul naturally broke apart, rather than use it? It didn’t add up... and that was the mistake.

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Ning, Autarch Titanos, and Autarch Mogg continued to stand in midair. By now, the area in front of them was filled with an enormous amount of Emperors. There had to be over three thousand of them, and all of them were Sithe descendants! Around thirty or so were at the Hegemon level of power... Clearly, the Sithe were far superior in rearing and teaching their Emperors.

Ning looked at the group before him. “Although you are descendants of the Sithe, you are still part of our Chaosverse. The true Sithe were invaders who came here from another place. They don’t care about you at all. We won’t demand that you take part in our war against the Sithe, but you are not to assist them either. We’ll arrange for you to stay in an otherverse of your own, and you can live quiet lives there. Don’t take part in this clash of civilizations.”

“Thank you, Daolord Darknorth.” Hawkfang led the group in expressing reverent thanks.

“Thank you, Daolord.” A few others quickly followed his lead.

“Thank you, Daolord.” Finally, all of them bowed towards Ning, with many of them tearing up as they did so. They had long ago sensed that the Sithe treated them differently, and they had been discriminated against for many, many years.

“You can go now. Evacuate all the mortals from the six mortal realms,” Ning instructed. “This place isn’t safe.”

“Understood.”

“We’ll go right now.”

“Let’s go.” The awesome army of over three thousand Hegemons and Emperors quickly flew away, beginning a large-scale evacuation of this realm. Although the six mortal realms in this dimension held many living beings, over three thousand Emperors were working together to evacuate them. They gave the mortals some time to prepare for their departure, but it still only took them just half a day before completing the evacuation process.

Ning then led the Sithe descendants in departing from the Sithelands. He brought them to an extremely distant, out-of-the-way location within the Great Dark.

Rumble... a massive otherverse suddenly appeared within the darkness.

“Go ahead and bind it, Hawkfang,” Ning said, glancing at the three thousand-plus Emperors before him. All of the Emperors were filled with excitement. If given a chance to live in peace, who would choose to serve as cannon fodder instead? This was doubly true when they would only be repaid for their sacrifices with contempt and belittlement.

“Alright.” Hawkfang’s eyes were shining brightly. He could sense that the life he had been longing for was finally at hand.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. After Hawkfang bound the otherverse to himself, the thousands of Emperors all began to fly inside it. Ning, Mogg, and Titanos all smiled at the sight.

“This is a secluded place where I once trained. If any Sithe come here, I will be alerted instantly,” Autarch Mogg said.

“Let these Sithe descendants live a peaceful life here,” Ning said.

“Once we defeat the Sithe, the entire Chaosverse will be at peace as well,” Titanos said with a smile.

All three of them were looking forward to that day.

“Gentlemen, now that everything has been taken care of, it’s time for me to depart,” Ning said.

“I’ll send you back,” Autarch Mogg volunteered.

“Haha, no need.” Ning shook his head and smiled. “I’m not exactly busy. The only thing I’m concerned with is creating a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique. Although the journey back to my homeland is a long one, I’ll take this opportunity to do some sightseeing. Who knows, I might even find something which inspires me.”

“Very well.” Mogg and Titanos didn’t try to press the issue.

Ning re-entered his realmship. Azurefiend’s avatar once more began to pilot it, sending it disappearing into the Great Dark under the watchful gazes of Mogg and Titanos.

Chapter 3: Meeting Autarch Stonerule

Within the realmship. Ji Ning sat in the lotus position, staring at the dazzling prismatic spacetime tunnel as marvelous realmverses flickered past them, but his mind was occupied on the 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique.

"A Truesoul Everlasting... if I can create a technique like this, it would allow even the damage caused by a failed Daomerge to be reversed, with the truesoul being healed." Ning was keenly attuned to the sensations of his truesoul crumbling away.

His Immortal energy, his godsense, his azureflower mist energy... all of it was filled with his truesoul. But now, every speck of his soul was beginning to crack apart, with tiny flakes of it slowly drifting off and disappearing...

"This crumbling is taking part in every part of my truesoul. Not a single inch of it remains intact," Ning mused. "How should I reverse it?"

When Ning had been a Daolord of the Third Step, he had 'died' once but been revived thanks to the Lifeblood Dao-seal. The Lifeblood Dao-seal was filled with a portion of Ning's undamaged truesoul, making revival a simple process. But now that Ning's truesoul had already begun to crumble... there was no known technique which could be used to stop it.

"How to reverse it? How do you reverse that which has already crumbled apart?" Ning mentally reviewed the mysteries of the [Deathless Chapter] while comparing it to his own crumbling process, and as he did so he would occasionally make a few changes and improvements to the chapter.

After five million years of non-stop meditation, Ning finally woke up. "Azurefiend, where are we?" Ning asked.

"We're halfway there. Give us another six million years and we'll reach the Flamedragon Realmverse," Azurefiend's avatar said.

"No need for us to rush. Let's explore the surrounding realms while we are here," Ning said.

“Yes, Master,” Azurefiend’s avatar said hurriedly. The time he had spent following Ning had shown him far more stunning sights than everything he had experienced in the past. They had captured over two thousand Hegemons and Emperors, fought against a Sithe Daoguard Tower, seen strange creatures which came from beyond the Chaosverse, and more. He had never seen such incredible things in the past! Ning also treated him very well, and he in turn would silently pray: “I hope Master can remain alive forever. That would be wonderful.”

So long as Ning remained alive, he would have a powerful backer supporting him.

They continued to wander through the cosmos, visiting the marvelous sights the Chasoverse had to offer as well as the many unique lifeforms it had birthed. Every so often, Ning would enter periods of silent meditation to reflect on what he saw.

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A vast planet which was teeming with life.

Ning was seated at the peak of a mountain, silently meditating with Azurefiend’s avatar standing guard next to him. Ning had been training here for billions of years now, and ever since he started there had been no creatures who could move near this peak. A maze formation had been established halfway up the mountain, and those who escaped the maze would find themselves back at the base of the mountain.

“Young fellow, the destiny that brought us together must come to an end today. Your future accomplishments will be up to your own efforts. I accepted a total of six disciples before you. If you ever meet them, you’ll know it right away. Remember – you must not battle amongst yourselves.” Azurefiend’s avatar remained by Ning’s side, while he had created an incarnation to chat with a youth at the base of the mountain.

“Your disciple understands, Master.” The youth’s eyes were brimming with tears. The past year he had spent with his master had been a truly transformative one for him.

“Go,” Azurefiend’s avatar said, then vanished without a trace. The youth

repeatedly kowtowed before departing as well.

At the peak of the mountain.

“Azurefiend, you actually took on seven disciples during the years I was training?” Ning’s voice rang out.

Azurefiend was badly startled. He turned to glance at Ning, who had already risen to his feet, then let out a deep chortle: “Don’t tease me, Master. I was bored and had nothing to do. I spent my time just watching the countless people who lived in this world, and every so often I would find one I liked and take him or her on as a disciple.”

“Hahaha! Well, it is time for us to return to the Flamedragon Realmverse,” Ning said. “We’ll be leaving soon, so go ahead and finish making any arrangements necessary for your disciples.”

“No need. I’ve made those arrangements long ago and have given them everything they should be given. The rest will be up to them. The path of cultivation is a path of self-reliance, after all,” Azurefiend said.

“Very well. Let’s head off.”

Whoosh. The realmship flew away from the snowy peak, and the maze formation which had surrounded it for so many years finally vanished as well, becoming nothing more than a mystery and a legend to this planet.

Ning ended up spending nearly half a chaos cycle on the return trip back to the Three Realms. He had gained quite a few insights into the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique, but he also gained a better understanding of how difficult it would be.

The crumbling of the truesoul involved countless tiny little flakes disappearing and returning to the Quintessence of the Chaosverse. To reverse this process by seizing those truesoul fragments back from the Quintessence was impossible! Not even Autarchs could succeed in this.

The only other possibility was to use the remaining fragments to somehow remake a complete, undamaged truesoul anew! This was very similar to the concept of ‘Blood-Drop Rebirth’, wherein Fiendgods who had reached the Zifu Disciple stage of cultivation would be able

completely remake their entire bodies from a single drop of blood, if they had enough divine power to do so. This was because that single drop of blood contained the essence and foundation for the entire body! Now, however, Ning was trying to accomplish this with something that was even more fundamental... the truesoul.

His goal was to allow a powerful cultivator whose soul had shattered and whose truesoul was breaking apart to be able to remake the truesoul anew. So long as just one scrap of truesoul was remaining, the cultivator would be able to use the 'Truesoul Everlasting' to recreate the entire truesoul, then reconstitute the spirit and the body.

A very familiar realmverse appeared before them. "We reached the Flamedragon Realmverse." Ning revealed a delighted look from within the realmship. Finally, they had returned. Home was home, and the feeling of being home was unlike any other.

"Eh?" Ning turned to look in a different direction. He could sense through karma that another powerful figure, Autarch Stonerule, was located within the Flamedragon Realmverse.

Just one second later... whoosh! Space rippled around Ning, followed by the dazzlingly handsome Autarch Stonerule appearing.

"Autarch Stonerule." Ning flew out of the realmship to greet him, with Azurefiend's avatar following obediently from behind.

"Darknorth." Autarch Stonerule smiled.

"Why have you come here, Autarch?" Ning asked curiously.

"Because of you, obviously!" Autarch Stonerule said with a laugh. "I've been waiting for quite some time."

"Sorry, sorry. I wasn't in a rush so I took the scenic route while taking the occasional cultivation break," Ning explained. "That's why it took me a while to come back. If I had known you were here, I would've immediately returned."

"I'm just teasing you. I'm not in a rush either," Autarch Stonerule said. "I came here because there are a few things I need to tell you."

“Hm?” Ning looked at Autarch Stonerule.

“All of us have been analyzing the [Five Truncheon Chapters] you gave us. We’re in the process of completing the [Daolord Chapter], but as for the most important [Deathless Chapter]... I’m sorry to say we probably won’t be able to help you much,” Autarch Stonerule said helplessly.

“There’s nothing you can do?” Ning felt rather anxious. Although he had made some improvements in recent years, he knew just how difficult it would be to create a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique. He had been counting on the Autarchs being able to help him out with it.

“We want to help you, but the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique revolves around reversing the process of a truesoul’s decay,” Autarch Stonerule said. “The problem was... all of us Autarchs have perfectly intact truesouls. We’ve never experienced the crumbling process ourselves! We’ve seen the truesouls of quite a few failed Daolords break apart, yes, but just watching it as an outsider doesn’t really mean much. We don’t know what it is like to have the truesoul break apart, so we have no idea where we should even begin to fix it.”

“What?” Ning was stunned. The Autarchs had never experienced their truesouls breaking apart, which meant that they were unable to make any headway with regards to the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique?

“But the Sithe’s Lord of Chaos...?” Ning said.

“He’s at a much higher level of insight than us, which was why he was able to come up with a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique,” Autarch Stonerule explained. “The six of us are merely on par with you, and we’ve never truly experienced our truesouls breaking apart. Our chances of being able to reverse the truesoul process via a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique are extremely slim. I came to tell you this in person because I don’t want you to place too much hope on us being able to help you.”

Ning nodded. “I understand.” This had always been a path which would likely result in failure. Autarch Stonerule’s words were a bit discouraging, but Ning was able to accept them calmly.

“But of course, we’re still going to keep working at it,” Autarch Stonerule

said. "There's something else I wanted to discuss with you."

"Something else?" Ning was puzzled.

"The Sithe are desperate to kill you. We believe that the Sithe are paying close attention to whether you are dead or not," Autarch Stonerule said.

"That's why I came in person to take a look at the Flamedragon Realmverse. I followed up on quite a few clues, and in the end I managed to find a few Sithe spies."

Autarch Stonerule waved his hand, causing a total of six individuals to appear before him. All of them simply stood there, their gazes vacant. One was a Hegemon, while five were Emperors.

"Spies?" Ning frowned.

"They've infiltrated the Brightshore Kingdom and Vastheaven Palace, hoping to be able to keep track of your status via your heartlamp and similar items," Autarch Stonerule said.

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RWX's Thoughts

Happy reading, guys. Didn't have the chance to do DE translating today and won't tomorrow either, but that's what a stockpile is for. Here are the first two chapters of the week!

Chapter 4: Solving the Heart of Eternity

Ji Ning stared at the six captured Sithe spies, then chuckled: “I’m a failed Daolord. Why would the Sithe be willing to expend this much effort on me?”

“It’s best if we keep your status a secret,” Autarch Stonerule said seriously. “The Sithe have never given up on their efforts to keep our entire Chaosverse under surveillance. In the past, we didn’t really care as we were sure their army remained permanently sealed within the Sithe heartlands, but it now appears highly probable that they long ago found out a way to slip out undetected. They’ve been biding their time, waiting to deliver a fatal blow to us. We’re quietly making arrangements for our forces throughout the Chaosverse to prepare for war, but this will take time. So long as you are still alive, the Sithe will be hesitant to start the war.”

“Right.” Ning nodded. The Sithe would naturally be unwilling to start the war while Ning was alive. Not because they feared him; rather, because they worried that the high-pressure life-and-death environment created by the war would result in Ning suddenly making a breakthrough and mastering an Autarch-level Dao! If that happened, Ning would be able to easily take control over the entire Chaosverse, and the problem with his crumbling truesoul would disappear.

Although chances of this happening were remote, the Sithe were unwilling to take this risk. Anyone who was able to master an Eternal Omega Dao on his own, without any guidance at all, was without question an incredibly talented figure who would have the blessing of the entire Chaosverse itself. It was entirely possible that a ‘miracle’ would happen, resulting in him gaining Autarchy.

Thus, it was best for the Sithe to play it safe. They would wait for Ning’s truesoul to completely break apart before launching the war! By then, the cultivators wouldn’t have even a single Eternal Omega Dao wielder at all, much less an Omega Autarch. The greatest fear of the Sithe would’ve been avoided.

“With your Eternal Omega Sword Dao serving as the guide, we’ve already begun to lead some of the most talented geniuses of the entire Chaosverse onto the path of the Omega Dao. However, the birth of a new Omega Emperor will take time! We might need millions of chaos cycles or even longer. I’m afraid the Sithe won’t give us the time we need,” Autarch Stonerule said. “But so long as you remain alive? They’ll have something to fear, something which holds them back.”

“I understand. I know what to do.” Ning smiled.

“Then I’ll be leaving now. Let me know right away if there’s anything you need.” Autarch Stonerule waved his hand, collecting the six spies and then disappearing without a trace.

Ning watched as he vanished, already beginning to consider what his next steps should be.

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That very day, Ning went to meet with Hegemon Brightshore and Emperor Solesky.

“Brother Brightshore. Big brother Solesky.” Ning said, “My truesoul has been crumbling away ever since I failed the Daomerge. I’m worried that the remaining Sithe are trying to keep tabs on my status! Thus, we must destroy the heartlamp in the Sword Palace of the Brightshore Kingdom and the other life-monitoring artifacts pertaining to me in the Dao Alliance and in Vastheaven Palace.”

“Destroy?” Brightshore and Solesky were both puzzled.

“Then, we’ll replace them with fake ones,” Ning said. “The fake ones we create will always show that I am ‘alive’, even if ten million chaos cycles go by. I want the Sithe to always believe that I might be alive.”

Solesky couldn’t help but argue, “Creating a fake one will be easy, but your truesoul is breaking apart! Even if the fake soul lamps are lit for a million chaos cycles, do you really think the Sithe would believe that you are still alive?”

“Solesky, that could be explained away by temporal deceleration, yes? A

million chaos cycles could go by in the outside world, but for Darknorth only ten thousand chaos cycles would have gone past.” Hegemon Brightshore looked at Ning. “Darknorth, what are you planning to do next?”

“Go into secluded meditation,” Ning said. “After this, we probably won’t be meeting again.”

“Do you have a way to reverse the crumbling of your truesoul?” Hegemon Brightshore said rather anxiously.

“A way?” Ning smiled. “Maybe. Alright, enough of that. I’m going to leave with Youji and Pillsaint.”

That very day, Ning departed from Vastheaven Palace with Su Youji, Pillsaint, and his other retainers in tow. They went back to the Three Realms.

Everything which was able to detect Ning’s status, such as his heartlamps or his life towers, were all destroyed and then replaced with fake versions. In all the Chaosverse, the only ones who would know for sure if Ning was alive or not were the Autarchs, Nuwa, and Subhuti! Not even his daughter Brightmoon or his parents would have a way to know for sure.

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After finishing all of his arrangements, Ning entered the Azureflower Estate by himself. He needed the help of the Autarch’s stone dais for this project.

“Daolord Darknorth.” The estate-spirit was clearly much more respectful towards him than it had been in the past.

“I’ll be spending almost all of my remaining time on researching the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique.” Ning smiled. “Sorry to disturb you.”

“Daolord, if you really were able to create such a technique, you would’ve brought boundless blessings upon the entire Chaosverse. Not only would you yourself survive, you will have saved countless future generations of cultivators to come. Our entire Chaosverse shall thrive and

grow strong.” The estate-spirit was filled with anticipation.

Ning smiled and nodded, then closed his eyes and emptied out his mind of all extraneous thoughts. With the Autarch’s stone dais and the Stonefire Pearl aiding him, Ning began to meditate on the task at hand. Countless insights flashed through his mind as he continuously analyzed, hypothesized, and restructured the technique he needed. With the [Deathless Chapter] serving as his framework, Ning knew what he needed to do. Every so often, he would finish completing a [Truesoul Everlasting] technique, but each time he tested it out he would discover that it didn’t work.

Time continued to flow on. Every so often, Ning would take a break from researching the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ to work on solving Autarch Awakener’s ‘Heart of Eternity’.

More than 1600 years after he had entered secluded meditation

Crack! Crack! Crack! Ning finally solved the seals covering the ninety-ninth level of the Heart of Eternity hovering before him. The final layer of incredibly complicated runes vanished from the sphere, and it was as though some mechanism had been activated within it. Moments later, the insides of the sphere were revealed.

Rumble... a streak of light shot out, resolving into a scholarly youth who was dressed in white robes with blue fringes. Ning immediately recognized this person as being Autarch Awakener! Autarch Awakener had been the most scholarly Autarch, the one with the biggest dreams. He had spent countless aeons working on the tenth chaos seal.

“Young friend,” the white-robed scholar said. Ning immediately understood that this was a projection which Autarch Awakener had left behind before his death.

“Since you were able to solve the ninety-ninth seal covering the Heart of Eternity, you must be at or near my own level with regards to the chaos seals I devised,” the white-robed scholar said with a smile. “Thus, you are probably strong and wise enough to know of the great danger our entire civilization is facing, and of the foes threatening our entire Chaosverse...

the Sithe. The Sithe are still there, and they are still as dangerous as ever.”

“The Sithe are able to repair even shattered truesouls, allowing them to attempt the Daomerge repeatedly. They also have a more perfect energy system, allowing them to generate far more Autarchs than us.

“I have always hoped to create a similar technique which would allow us to birth more Hegemons, and perhaps as many as ten or twenty Autarchs! If I succeeded, we would easily win the battle which is yet to come.

“I have left behind my Nine Chaos Seals to this Chaosverse. Although their flaws mean that one can only successfully start to train in them prior to reaching the World level, I actually fixed those flaws long ago in my own version. I imagine that you, my young friend, can easily do the same as well. The reason why I intentionally published a flawed version of the Nine Chaos Seals is because those who cannot master it prior to the World level cannot be considered true geniuses. There is no chance that they can succeed in helping me to perfect the tenth stage of the technique.

“Within the Heart of Eternity lies the true, perfected version of the Nine Chaos Seals, as well as two lines of thought I have pondered while researching the tenth seal. I wasn’t able to succeed through either of these two paths, but I feel that both can theoretically lead to success. They represent my greatest accomplishments, and I entrust them to you along with my hopes and dreams.

“This is all the Heart of Eternity holds. In terms of value, this probably is not that valuable to someone who is incapable of solving the Heart of Eternity... but to one who was able to solve it, they may perhaps be of some use.

“My young friend... after spending countless aeons in painstaking research, I discovered that I was unable to advance any further. This is why I gave up. I hope you can complete the Ten Chaos Seals and give our civilization a chance to defeat the looming threat. If you can... then I, Awakener, will be grateful even in death.” Autarch Awakener smiled, then his projection vanished.

The white-haired elder who was the estate-spirit had been watching this

entire time. Tears streamed down his face.

Ning could sense the powerful will which had driven Autarch Awakener to do so much. He felt a deep sense of admiration for Awakener, who truly had been a leader for the cultivator civilizations.

Ning turned to inspect the contents of the Heart of Eternity, which indeed held many techniques and records left behind by Autarch Awakener. One of those techniques was the perfected Nine Chaos Seals.

The perfect Nine Chaos Seals could be trained in by World-level cultivators, Daolords, and even Emperors. After doing so, it could be used like 'divine power' inside the body and 'Immortal energy' outside the body. This was a truly flawless type of energy... but it was limited to the first nine stages.

"Perfecting it was simple." Ning was at such a high level of enlightenment that he immediately grasped the principles behind it. Given enough time, he too would be able to duplicate the work which Awakener had done.

"So Autarch Awakener actually had two different lines of theory, both of which he thought could be successful in creating the Tenth Chaos Seal?" Ning nodded slowly. He had the assistance of the [Deathless Chapter], and he was using it and his own insights to pursue multiple avenues of research as well. Two of them were the ones which Autarch Awakener believed to be workable. The first was the path of the 'Infinity Everlasting', while the second was the path of the 'Void Everlasting'.

Ning began to greedily read through Autarch Awakener's notes. Over the course of aeons of research, Autarch Awakener had clearly gained many more insights than Ning with regards to these two paths. He also had many different ideas of his own, which quickly gave Ning new insights and ideas.

Ning became completely focused on reviewing Autarch Awakener's work and adding it to his own. A thousand chaos cycles... two thousand chaos cycles... five thousand chaos cycles... ten thousand chaos cycles...

Time continued to flow onwards, as cold and uncaring as ever.

Chapter 5: Out of Seclusion

The white-robed Ji Ning was as still as a statue, his eyes closed. He had been seated there for countless years now.

Finally, Ning opened his eyes. His gaze was filled with the boundless power of space and time, containing all the cosmos within them.

“Truesoul Everlasting...” Ning murmured softly. He had the insights of Autarch Awakener and the [Deathless Chapter], as well as 15,000 chaos cycles worth of meditation. By now, he had reached a level of understanding with regards to the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ that vastly surpassed Autarch Awakener’s.

“It has been over 15,000 chaos cycles. I only have 1000 chaos cycles left. Time for me to resolve my various affairs.” Ning rose to his feet.

His original body’s lifespan had been rapidly depleted due to the battles which it had fought, but this body had never fought a single time since failing the Daomerge. The Water Sword Dao, Space Sword Dao, Illusion Sword Dao, and other Daos had all strengthened his truesoul considerably, dramatically slowing down the crumbling rate and extending his lifespan considerably.

However, he had spent over 15,000 chaos cycles in training. He didn’t have much time left, and he had some things he wanted to resolve before he could finally, fully devote himself while holding nothing back at all.

“Daolord Darknorth.” The elderly white-haired estate-spirit immediately came over to him.

“I’m going to make a short trip. The next time I come back, I’ll be entering terminal seclusion.”

“Terminal seclusion?” The white-haired elder was shocked. He could sense the firm resolve within Ning’s words.

Terminal seclusion... it represented abandoning everything else and entering seclusion for the final time. Either one would succeed in one’s goal, or one would die in seclusion, never to return!

Ning departed from the Azureflower Estate and made his way over to the Three Realms.

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Ning arrived at Brightheart Island in Serpentwing Lake. This was where Ning's family resided, and Ning's three major retainers Azurefiend, Su Youji, and Pillsaint lived here as well, as did Ning's eighth disciple 'Stonepool'.

Everyone was seated, happily enjoying a meal together.

"Ji Ning, each time you go into seclusion you disappear for a few thousand chaos cycles. We hardly see you these days," Ji Yichuan said with a smile. He was in a wonderful mood today. Whenever Ning reached a bottleneck, he would leave seclusion and spend some time with his family. During the past 15,000 chaos cycles, he had exited seclusion a total of six times.

"Our son is busy with something that's very important to him. He needs to stay in seclusion to do his best, rather than stay with us and let you bother him all the time." Yuchi Snow immediately leapt to Ning's defense, then turned and smiled at him: "Ning, son... let me make the introductions. Dawnjade, come over here."

The adorable child who had been waiting nearby for quite some time immediately ran over. Yuchi Snow happily took the child's hand, then said towards Ning, "Dawnjade is the most intelligent child our Ji clan has produced in aeons. He's an absolutely unparalleled genius who has embarked upon the path of the Omega Dao. He is currently a Daolord of the Second Step."

"Oh?" Ning glanced at the 'child' in astonishment.

"Greetings, Patriarch Darknorth," Ji Dawnjade said respectfully.

"Father, I have to admit that Dawnjade is very talented. He's much more talented than me," the nearby Brightmoon said happily. "He's only been cultivating for a very brief amount of time, and we didn't dare to disturb you when you were in seclusion. That's why we didn't inform you when he

became a Daolord.”

Ning had long ago instructed that he was only to be disturbed if someone was in mortal danger. Otherwise, his seclusion was not to be interrupted.

Ning looked the child over, his eyes lighting up.

He had long ago instructed his daughter, Brightmoon, to take his place in teaching his eighth disciple, ‘Stonepool’. After spending many years training together, the two of them had actually ended up becoming Dao-companions! Both of them had actually been emotionally hurt when they were young. Brightmoon had been single her entire life, while Stonepool had poured all of his efforts on cultivation. Still... after spending many years together, they began to grow extremely fond of each other.

The two had ended up having a child... and Stonepool had voluntarily suggested that the child have the surname ‘Ji’ in order to show respect to his master and father-in-law, Ji Ning! If they had a second child, that child would take his family name. And so, Ning’s lineage began to grow.

Time had passed on, and Ji Ning’s line had flourished. All of them were born with tremendous blessings of karmic luck, but none of them were comparable to the most impressive geniuses of this realmverse... until, that is, Dawnjade was born. He was incredibly intelligent and sailed through his path of cultivation, rapidly advancing to the World level with her clan’s aid. He had then gone out adventuring... and the end result was that he had also embarked upon the path of the Omega Sword Dao!

In truth, the Autarchs had already begun to ensure that quite a number of geniuses scattered throughout the vast Chaosverse had begun to train in the path of the Omega Dao. There was now one or two in virtually every single realmverse who trained in an Omega Dao... and after over ten thousand chaos cycles, the Ji clan had finally given birth to a second such genius. Yichuan and Snow naturally doted on him heavily.

“Mm.” Ning stared at Dawnjade, scanning his past as he did so. Ning could even get a vague sense of what the future held in store for the child, and what he saw was a truly extraordinary destiny. The boy would

probably surpass even Ning's eight disciples... but in the end, the Daomerge would remain a huge obstacle.

"Good. Good!" Ning actually praised the boy twice. "Dawnjade, from this day forth, you shall stay by my side. If you have any questions at all, don't hesitate to ask me."

"Yes, Patriarch!" Dawnjade said excitedly. He all but worshipped the ground 'Patriarch Ji' walked on; the Patriarch was a man who treated with Autarchs as an equal! Dawnjade had also heard many boasting stories from Hegemon Azurefiend, including the story of how the Patriarch had captured nearly four thousand Emperors with ease. He knew that the Patriarch was inconceivably powerful and was the most supreme expert of the Dao of the Sword their Chaosverse had ever seen.

The more Ning saw of Dawnjade, the more he liked the boy. Ning felt almost as though he was seeing a reflection of himself in many ways. If Ning himself failed in his terminal seclusion but Dawnjade succeeded in his Daomerge... that wouldn't be too bad an outcome.

"Sit next to me," Ning ordered. He didn't disguise his fondness for Dawnjade in the slightest.

"Brightmoon." Ning turned and smiled. "Has anything important happened lately?" Each time Ning left his secluded meditation, he would ask her this question.

Both Brightmoon and Stonepool were Daolords of the Fourth Step. The former was Ning's daughter, while the latter was Ning's disciple. They often wandered the outside world, and they were well-versed in what was happening lately.

"Yes, actually. Something very important happened," Brightmoon said. "I actually considered asking you to leave seclusion, but in the end I decided not to disturb you. For you to find out a bit later doesn't make much of a difference."

"Something very important? What?" Ning asked curiously.

"Second brother 'Green Bamboo' succeeded in the Daomerge and

became a Hegemon!” Brightmoon said happily. “He was the first in our group to attempt the Daomerge. To this very day, I’m still afraid to make the attempt!”

“Quding succeeded in the Daomerge?” Ning was delighted to hear this. He immediately began inspect the karmic threads binding him to his disciple.

His second disciple, ‘Green Bamboo’ Yang Quding. When Ning was at the World level, Ning had met him by accident when he had entered Annihilation’s otherverse. Back then Yang Quding had been an ordinary mortal, but his Dao-heart had impressed Ning. Ning had taken a liking to him and had accepted him as his second disciple.

Ning always had the feeling that his second disciple would probably become an extremely accomplished figure... but Ning never would’ve expected him to become a Hegemon so quickly!

“After he succeeded in the Daomerge he came here in person, wanting to pay his respects to you, Father. I didn’t want to disturb you, so after discussing the matter with Patriarch Subhuti I decided to give him three Sithe treasures as a celebratory gift,” Brightmoon said.

“You did well.” Ning nodded. He had acquired many Sithe treasures from that hidden dimension, but he had given them over to Nuwa, Subhuti, and Brightmoon to hand out as they saw fit. He wouldn’t hand over treasures of such power to even his disciples without a good reason. Giving his second disciple a few of them to celebrate his Hegemony, however, was fine.

“I’m not finished. Not too long ago, second brother received an otherverse and became an Otherverse Lord!” Brightmoon said happily. “He didn’t acquire it in battle, he was given it by an Autarch.”

“By an Autarch?” Ning was startled. Ning knew the Autarchs very well; they wouldn’t casually hand over otherverses to juniors, no matter how much they liked them. They acted impartially in all things.

“So here’s the story. Second brother is incredibly talented in the Dao of the Sword and has a perfect Dao-heart. He had an accidental meeting with

the Autarch of Annihilation, who tested him. He passed the test, and the Autarch viewed him so favorably that the Autarch bestowed an otherverse upon him,” Brightmoon said.

“A perfect Dao-heart?” Ning was astonished. A perfect Dao-heart was a prerequisite for becoming an Autarch, and also a prerequisite for succeeding in the Daomerge for an Omega Dao. Everyone who had a perfect Dao-heart was without a doubt an extraordinary character.

“No wonder Ekong showed him such favor.” Ning had felt long ago that Green Bamboo had an extraordinary heart and was highly suited for cultivating in the Dao. Ning had ‘released him into the wild’ and allowed him to make his own way in the world as a mortal cultivator with just a few techniques. Ning hadn’t spent too much time teaching or taking care of this second disciple; the man had to rely on himself for everything.

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RWX's Thoughts

So tired. Had a 9 AM to 11:30 PM yesterday which was capped off by business beers, fell asleep as I was editing and preparing to release. Oh well, the next two chapters will come in around 17 hours!

Chapter 6: Old Friends (Part 1)

Ji Ning was in an excellent mood today. “Tell me about how all my other disciples are doing, one by one.”

“Very well.” Brightmoon was rather surprised at her father inquiring in such detail, but she began to narrate without giving it much thought.

Ning had left his secluded meditations to wrap up all his worldly affairs. Of course he needed to get a good idea as to how his personal disciples were doing! While listening to his daughter speak, he also carefully inspected how they were doing through his karmic ties to them.

His first disciple, ‘Bluecliff Xiaoyu’, was even less talented than Brightmoon. To this very day, she remained just a World-level cultivator! Still, her life was a carefree one. Perhaps Xiaoyu preferred this sort of peaceful, quiet life.

His second disciple, ‘Green Bamboo’ Yang Quding, had become a Hegemon.

His third disciple, Skywind, had become a resoundingly famous figure within the Flamedragon Realmverse. He had caused quite a deal of trouble, and was stubborn to an extreme. He made many enemies, and for the sake of a female Immortal he had actually assaulted a major sect and slain two of its Emperors! He was now publicly acclaimed as the number one Daolord of the Flamedragon Realmverse. Ning, of course, had long ago transcended such silly rankings.

“Oh, Skywind... I was able to sense long ago that your future would be fraught with troubles. You’ve always been the one I’ve been the most worried about.” Ning shook his head, then decided, “I have to visit him one final time, it seems.”

The position of ‘fourth disciple’ remained vacant.

His fifth and sixth disciples, ‘Boundless’ and ‘Muse’, lived a romantic, heavenly life together as a pair of Immortal lovers. They remained happily in love, and together they wandered the various territories of the

Flamedragon Realmverse. This pleased Ning greatly.

His seventh disciple, 'Great Immortal Almonder', had a childlike disposition and loved to wander about. His current whereabouts were unknown.

His eight disciple, 'Stonepool', was a solid and reliable figure who had ended up together with Ning's daughter Brightmoon.

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After spending two years in the Three Realms, Ning departed with Azurefiend, Youji, Pillsaint, and his favored descendant Dawnjade. They left the Three Realms and began to wander through the world outside. They were going to visit his friends and disciples.

The very first person Ning went to visit was Ninedust, whom he had shared so many life-and-death adventures with.

Vast, billowing waves could be seen sweeping through this entire world. At the very center of the waves was a towering, silver-robed god who was 540,000 meters tall. He stood atop the endless waves, practicing a set of fist-arts. Every single punch and strike caused the waves around him to rumble and roil about.

A ship appeared far off in the distance, but it quickly came to a halt and did not interrupt.

Roughly an hour later, the training appeared to come to an end. Only then did the white-robed Ning call from next to the hovering realmship, "Ninedust!"

The Ninedust Sectlord turned to stare at Ning, a delighted look instantly appearing on his face: "Hah! Darknorth, my big shot Daolord friend! You surely are a sight for sore eyes. You actually came to visit me?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I know I didn't visit you a single time in many years. I've been in secluded meditation the entire time." Ning strolled over, with Su Youji and the others staying behind.

"As it should be. You are working on something important." Ninedust

looked at Ning. He could sense how Ning's truesoul was crumbling at a very fast pace, and he couldn't help but feel sorrow for his old friend. He knew that Ning wouldn't last for much longer. "Darknorth... have you come to bid me a final farewell?"

"Perhaps." Ning smiled. "I'm about to go into terminal seclusion and make one final push. If I succeed, I'll be able to reverse my truesoul's decay. If I fail... then yes, this will be the last time we two brothers have a chance to meet."

"Reverse your truesoul's decay?" Ninedust instantly became filled with hope.

"Death has always been the only outcome for anyone who fails the Daomerge," Ning said. "No cultivators in our Chaosverse have ever been able to change this! The Sithe are able to do so, but they are different from us on a fundamental level. Not even Autarchs are able to reverse a truesoul's decay. All I can do is try my best and then pray."

Ninedust patted Ning on the shoulder. "I'm sure you can do it."

"Enough about me. How have you been?" Ning smiled. "When are you planning to attempt the Daomerge? I can tell that you've reached an incredibly high level in the Dao of Water. From what I can see, you should be the one ranked at the top of the Daolord listings for the Flamedragon Realmverse. How did my disciple end up taking the position instead?"

Ning had passed on both the Incense Spirit-Fruit and several water-related techniques to Ninedust to help him out. Ninedust had trained assiduously and had reached an extremely high level of insight into the Dao of Water. It could be said that his defensive prowess surpassed that of all other Daolords in the Flamedragon Realmverse, save for Ning himself. He was absolutely strong enough to be ranked number one, but his actual ranking was fairly low.

"Who cares about those stupid lists? Look at you, Darknorth; you transcended that very concept long ago!" Ninedust chuckled. "Besides... as your brother, Skywind should be considered one of my juniors. How could I compete with him over something like this?"

“Skywind... he’s a bit too much of a showoff.” Ning shook his head slowly.

“But he has plenty to show off. I once sparred with him when he first became a Daolord of the Fourth Step. He truly did amaze me.” Ninedust let out a sigh.

“Excessive hardness leads to brittleness. He’s too extreme... but perhaps that’s also what made him so special.” Ning shook his head. Of his many disciples, his third disciple had been given the hardest path. The man had experienced numerous difficulties as a mortal, and hadn’t ended after becoming a Daolord.

“When are you planning to begin your Daomerge?” Ning asked.

“Soon. Thanks to the techniques you gave me, I can sense that my Dao is growing even more perfect than before.” Ninedust smiled. “Once I feel it has reached full perfection, I’ll use the Incense Spirit-Fruit and begin the Daomerge. It’ll be anywhere between 10,000 chaos cycles and 50,000 chaos cycles from now.”

“I’ll have to come to offer my congratulations once you succeed,” Ning said with a laugh.

“You must,” Ninedust agreed.

Both had their own tribulations to overcome. Ninedust had to deal with the tribulation known as the Daomerge, while Ning had to deal with the crumbling of his truesoul. Both of these two brothers had to succeed if they wished to meet again.

By comparison, Ninedust stood a very good chance; he had already used a Voidsea Jadeseal and been given both techniques and an Incense Spirit-Fruit by Ning. Ning’s chances were much lower.

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After spending quite some time chatting with his old friend Ninedust, Ning finally bade the Ancient cultivator farewell.

A short while later, Ning headed off to an ordinary chaosworld within

the Flamedragon Realmverse. He had come here to meet his third disciple, Skywind.

Ning found Skywind in the corner of an alehouse. Skywind was dressed in ordinary gray robes. The robes were not magic in any manner; these truly were cheap hemp robes which mortal peasants might wear. He was caked in filth, and his hair was disheveled. He sat there in the corner, drinking wine by himself. He was never able to get drunk, but he still came here to drink quite often.

No one in the alehouse dared to bother him... because half a year ago, this filthy-looking man had killed the governor of this city with a pair of chopsticks.

“Drinking by yourself?” a voice rang out.

Startled, Skywind looked up. Someone had actually been able to approach him without him even noticing it? And this person clearly hadn’t hidden his aura either; Skywind could clearly sense the aura of the sword about him. How did I not notice him approaching? This was so strange that Skywind could hardly believe it.

When he turned around, he saw a white-robed Ning seated at a nearby bench. Ning poured himself a cup of wine.

“Master!” When Skywind saw Ning, he immediately fell to his knees and kowtowed. He respected and revered his master more than anyone else.

Ning simply watched as his disciple kowtowed, not moving to stop him.

“You can get up,” Ning said a moment later.

“Alright.” Skywind rose to his feet.

Ning picked up his wine cup. “Come. Let the two of us, master and disciple, share a cup of wine.”

Skywind immediately lifted up his own wine cup and offered Ning a respectful toast. None of the ordinary mortals within this alehouse were able to notice or sense Ning’s presence.

After finishing the wine, Skywind said in a guilty manner: “I’ve

disappointed you, Master.”

“There’s nothing to be disappointed about. Cultivation can lead to countless different paths,” Ning said. “A shadow was cast over your heart back in your homeland, long before you ever entered the Flamedragon Realmverse. For you to end up in your current situation... I blame myself as your master for not having helped you more.”

“It isn’t your fault, Master. This is the path I chose for myself,” Skywind said hastily. He himself knew that he had gone too far in his murderous actions. If it hadn’t been for the fact that his master was Daolord Darknorth, the Archons of the Sacred Cities probably would’ve wiped him out long ago.

“So are you planning to just spend your final years here?” Ning asked.

“I’m tired,” Skywind said softly. “I don’t want to run around any longer, and I don’t want to go back home either. I suppose I’ll just keep living here in this mortal world.”

“You might as well.” Ning didn’t try to dissuade him. “This will most likely be our final meeting. Let’s just share some wine with each other. I’ll only give you one final piece of advice – In cultivation, you must always follow your heart. The only thing you need to do is stay true to yourself. If you can do that, then there will be no need to feel any fear, nor will you need to feel guilt.”

Skywind’s eyes reddened. He could sense how quickly his master’s truesoul was disintegrating. His master probably wouldn’t be able to survive for much longer.

“Now, enough of all that. Let’s drink.” Ning smiled as he lifted up his wine cup once more.

After a lengthy drinking session with his disciple, Ning departed. He could not interfere in someone else’s path of cultivation; he couldn’t even interfere in his own daughter’s Daomerge, save to provide her with as many resources as he could. The only thing he could do was to try and guide Skywind in following, strengthening, and perfecting his own Dao-heart. As for what Skywind would do afterwards? That would be up to

him.

Chapter 7: Old Friends (Part 2)

Ji Ning next led Su Youji and the others to visit his fifth disciple, his sixth disciple, and his seventh disciple.

Swoosh. The realmship continued to fly through the skies. “Dawnjade,” Ning said, “You are significantly more talented than all eight of my disciples.” By now, Ning had encountered many geniuses in his life. Mother Nuwa, for example, was so incredibly talented that she had reached Hegemony within an extremely short period of time. As Ning saw it, Dawnjade was extremely close to himself and Mother Nuwa in talent.

“However... you have an obvious weakness,” Ning said. “Due to the fact that you’ve always lived within the Ji clan, you’ve experienced almost no setbacks in your life. During your early years in particular, you were always given the best treatment by the clan. As a result, your Daoheart is lacking and needs tempering.”

“I understand,” Dawnjade said obediently.

‘Favored son’: this phrase described Dawnjade perfectly. Ning had been forced to scour the world for techniques, fighting and clawing for every scrap of karmic luck he could find before stumbling upon the path of the Omega Dao. Dawnjade was different. The Ji clan had poured its resources into rearing him, and had also arranged for him to undergo many different ‘tempering exercises’, but in the end all of those exercises were artificial. Dawnjade had a decent Daoheart, but it wasn’t even close to the perfect Daoheart one needed to succeed in the Daomerge for an Omega Dao.

“If you wish to succeed in the Daomerge for the Omega Dao, you must have a perfect Daoheart,” Ning said. “In the Flamedragon Realmverse, there was an Emperor known as Emperor Heartsword. If you can fully master his [Hear sword] art, you’ll have a perfect Daoheart. There are multiple legacies within the annals of the Ji clan pertaining to perfecting one’s Daoheart.”

“I understand.” Dawnjade nodded.

“Just ‘understanding’ is meaningless. You have to act,” Ning instructed.

“From this day forth, you shall begin training in the [Daoheart Illusion Sword].”

“The [Daoheart Illusion Sword]?” Dawnjade was puzzled. “Patriarch, I’ve never even heard of this technique.”

“This is a Daoheart technique which I just finished creating. I’d be shocked if you had heard of it,” Ning said with a chuckle. “It should be a technique which suits you very well... but in the end, you have to temper your Daoheart yourself. Techniques can only serve as a guide.” Ning waved his hand, producing a jade slip which he handed over to Dawnjade, who respectfully accepted it.

Emperor Heartsword, God Emperor Helong, ‘Green Bamboo’ Yang Quding... all of them had perfect Daohearts, and all of them were incredible figures. However, it would be extremely difficult for anyone else to gain perfect Daohearts by training in the techniques they left behind! This was because every cultivator had to find his own spiritual path to perfecting his Daoheart.

If Ning had tried to perfectly emulate the [Hear sword] art, he wouldn’t have been able to perfect his Daoheart either. In the end, he had only been able to take that final step during the Daomerge, using three years of time in that hyper-stimulated environment to succeed. Alas... all that wasted time had resulted in Ning failing the Daomerge!

“Although my technique will help you temper your Daoheart,” Ning said seriously, “You must remember... your Daoheart is your own. Not someone else’s! Thus in seeking the Dao, you must seek your own true self. If you want a perfect Daoheart, you’ll need to do it your own way.”

“Understood.” Dawnjade firmly engraved these words into his heart.

Ning said nothing further. He had scried Dawnjade’s future, and he knew that Dawnjade had to suffer many setbacks if the child wished to have a chance at perfecting his Daoheart. If everything in his life was completely smooth and troublefree, he might become a Daolord of the Fourth Step but he would never be able to perfect his Daoheart, much less succeed in the Daomerge.

.....

Within a secret realm hidden within a region of empty space. The insides of this secret realm had been half-demolished; clearly, a great battle had been fought here.

“Brother Greatjoy.” Ning stared at the palace ruins before him, his gaze piercing through spacetime and showing him what had occurred here in the past.

During the time Ning spent in seclusion, Daolord Greatjoy had perished in battle here! Greatjoy had been an incredible figure, but in the end his dying enemy had destroyed the entire realm around them in a final suicide attack. The two had died together.

.....

Skyfire Brightshore had a very relaxed life. Ning ate and drank and made merry with him for two days, then parted paths.

.....

Rumble... tens of thousands of chaos planets were being moved about like chess pieces. They slowly orbited a vast region of empty space, controlled by a great formation.

At the center of that region was a temple, and before that temple sat a skinny, bald, red-robed youth. An invisible surge of power swirled around him, encompassing the tens of thousands of chaos planets around him.

“Mortal-rank, class one mission – complete!”

“This was your first time embarking upon the path of cultivation. You survived, while all of your experienced teammates died. You are worth spending a bit of extra effort on. Do not disappoint me, Qin An.”

“Evaluation – 6.0!”

“Reward: 3000 Mortal-ranked gemstones.”

A spectacled youth stared, puzzled, at the illusory globe of light before him. This globe of light was filled with an enormous amount of information regarding cultivation, pill-making, and even how to transform

the body. One was even able to trade for mighty Fiendgod bodies that could be used to uproot the mountains themselves! But of course, the price would be high.

“I can even trade for a golem-body that would allow me to easily destroy a vast world with a wave of my hand? If all this is real... this is absolutely terrifying.” The spectacled youth’s eyes were shining as he continued to review the information. “I can bring the dead back to life and even travel to other worlds. Anything and everything is possible! This type of world is much more interesting than my old one. I love this world!”

Qin An was a nerd who lived in a world of ordinary mortals. He was extremely clever, but his brilliance was only put to good use after he was brought to the ‘Cataclysm Trials’.

He took on one mission after another, forming squads with others to challenge them. He sparred against many powerful martial artists, going so far as to actually embark upon the path of true Immortal cultivation. He was even sent into a world of Fiendgods, where he battled against mighty gods and fiends alike. He was tempered and tested over and over again. In the process, many teammates perished, but they were quickly replaced. The survivors only grew stronger and stronger.

.....

“Solewind, I have to say, this ‘Cataclysm Trials’ game you came up with is rather interesting.” Ning appeared in the emptiness of space outside the temple.

The skinny, bald, red-robed youth opened his eyes. A delighted look was on his face. “Darknorth, you came! What do you think? My Cataclysm Trials are pretty nice, eh? I used tens of thousands of chaos planets as the foundation for the formation, my many estate-treasures as support beams, and my Dao of Illusions to join them all together into the Cataclysm Trials. I then chose countless mortals to take part in my trials, allowing them to claw their way forwards upon the path of cultivation within it.”

“It’s not bad at all,” Ning praised.

“My heartforce is strengthened and improved by the process,” Solewind

said with a smile. "I'm planning to maintain the Cataclysm Trials for ten thousand chaos cycles. Hopefully, by then I'll be confident enough to attempt the Daomerge. If not, I'll find another way to train."

Ning nodded. It was extremely difficult for Heartforce Cultivators to succeed in the Daomerge. They had to try all sorts of strange, unique methods to train and improve themselves.

"Have you come to bid an old friend a final farewell?" Solewind suddenly asked. As powerful Heartforce Cultivators with strong hearts, there was no need for the two of them to mince words.

Ning nodded and smiled. "I'm going into terminal seclusion after this meeting."

"I've made many friends on my path of cultivation, but I admire you above all others," Solewind said. "You are going to succeed. You have to." Solewind knew that if Ning was going into terminal seclusion, that meant Ning was most likely trying a last-ditch effort to save himself. If Ning was truly out of options and saw no hope at all, why would he go into seclusion?

"Stop trying to make me feel better," Ning said with a chuckle. "I don't need it. By the way, I actually spent a thousand years watching events occur within your Cataclysm Trials."

"That long?" Solewind was surprised. "I use reality as the foundation, then use illusions to make up for reality's shortcomings. Now, why would the venerable Daolord Darknorth take an interest in such a simple technique?"

Ning explained, "I was actually watching a young fellow who was training within it. That's why I watched for a thousand years. Are you willing to let him follow me instead?"

"I might have put countless cultivators into my Cataclysm Trials, but only a few thousand have been able to survive for more than a thousand years. They are priceless treasures to me," Solewind said in an intentionally sorrowful manner. "Buuuut... since you've made the request, Daolord Darknorth, I suppose I must give you face. Which one

have you taken a fancy to?”

“The one called Qin An,” Ning said.

Qin An had come from a world which was extremely similar to the world Ning had lived in during his previous life, ‘Earth’. There were quite a few under-developed worlds like ‘Earth’ in the Chaosverse, and Daolord Solewind had teleported many people from such worlds to the Cataclysm Trials.

“Qin An! That boy was born to be a cultivator.” Solewind sighed dramatically. “You know, he doesn’t view the ‘trials’ of the Cataclysm Trials as dangers to be avoided. He eagerly dives into mission after mission! I actually prepared a few difficult trials just for him, but he managed to flip the script each time.”

“I’ve taken a liking to the kid as well,” Ning said. “I’m planning to take him on as a disciple.”

“Then he is one lucky kid.” Solewind immediately waved his hand.

Whoosh! A youth suddenly appeared in the emptiness of space by Solewind’s side. The kid was dressed in black robes and had a stately gaze. He looked completely harmless... but when he scanned the area around him and saw Daolord Solewind and Ji Ning, his eyes narrowed. He could sense that his very soul itself was quaking in fear. The auras emanating from the two individuals before him were absolutely terrifying.

Even though just hints of their auras were leaking out, the two were clearly unfathomably more powerful than even the most powerful creature he had ever encountered, an Elder God-class Fiendgod.

“I am the creator of the Cataclysm Trials. You can address me as ‘Solewind’.” Daolord Solewind's very first words caused the young Qin An to feel completely stunned. The creator of the Cataclysm Trials?!

Solewind smiled. “Next to me is my good friend, Darknorth. Qin An, today is your lucky day. My friend is far more powerful than I am, but he’s actually taken a fancy to you.”

“Qin An, are you willing to become my disciple and take me on as your

master?” Ning asked.

He had always followed his own heart in choosing new disciples. His ‘fourth disciple’, for example... Ning had simply tossed a talisman into a hidden location. Whoever was lucky enough to acquire it would become his fourth personal disciple! Thus far, this person had yet to arise. His seventh disciple ‘Almonder’ and his eighth disciple ‘Stonepool’ had all been extremely weak when Ning had first noticed them, while his second disciple ‘Green Bamboo’ Yang Quding had been just an ordinary mortal.

Ning cared more about the Daohearts of his potential disciples. And of course, he also chose people whose personalities he liked! He had seen countless beings struggling within the Cataclysm Trials, but the only one he had liked was Qin An! He admired how Qin An was still brimming with confidence and excitement despite having seen so much death and lost so many friends in the Cataclysm Trials. This truly was quite rare!

“I’m willing! Willing!” Qin An had experienced much in recent years, and he was no fool. He immediately knelt down and kowtowed: “Master, your disciple Qin An greets you!”

“Good. From this day forth, you shall be the ninth disciple of myself, Darknorth. You are the last personal disciple I shall ever take,” Ning said.

Solewind glanced at Qin An. How the hell was this kid so lucky? He actually became the final disciple Daolord Darknorth chose before going into terminal seclusion! It must be remembered that even major powers like Lord Houwu of the Blazesun Domain would love for the chance to become Ning’s servant and receive a few occasional pointers from him.

Ning looked at his new disciple, Qin An, then nodded. He now had a ninth disciple, and he had visited everyone he needed to visit. It was time to return to the Three Realms and prepare to enter terminal seclusion.

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RWX's Thoughts

We'll have more blasts from the past coming up soon! The next chapter, I'm REALLY excited for.

Chapter 8: Terminal Seclusion

Before Ji Ning brought his ninth disciple, Qin An, back to the Three Realms, he first paid a brief visit to the Badlands Territory.

“Halt,” Ning instructed. The realmship came to a halt in midair. Ning turned to glance at Qin An, then reached out to tap Qin An on the middle of his forehead. An enormous amount of information began to pour into Qin An’s mind, followed by three surges of sword-intent being hidden deep within his soul. All three surges of sword-intent were of varying levels of power.

At Qin An’s current level of power, if he had to learn this enormous amount of information from jade slips it would probably take over ten thousand years. Using this method, Ning had accomplished it in the blink of an eye. Most of the information, however, would remain sealed. Qin An was currently too weak; his soul and truesoul simply couldn’t absorb that much information at once.

“Master.” Qin An regained consciousness.

“Of my nine disciples, you are the most talented at dealing with danger,” Ning said. “I’ve left you three surges of sword-intent to protect you and many techniques for you to learn. The rest shall be up to you. This place is known as the Badlands Territories, and it is very vast, far vaster than the ‘Cataclysm Trials’ you were in. You’ll have to rely on yourself in adventuring through this place. Once you reach the World level or become a Daolord, you’ll probably be able to locate your fellow disciples.”

“World level?” This was an incredibly distant concept to Qin An. He hadn’t even become a Celestial Immortal yet!

“Alright, you can leave now. Your path will be your own.” Ning waved his hand. Whoosh! Qin An was teleported through spacetime into an ordinary chaosworld within the Badlands Territory.

“Master... you remain as, uh, succinct as ever in teaching your disciples,” Su Youji said with a snicker.

“The more setbacks they encounter, the farther they’ll make it on their respective paths,” Azurefiend said.

.....

When Ning returned to the Three Realms, he began to meet with some of his old friends for what was perhaps the final time.

Northmont Baiwei, Mu Northson, his master Immortal Diancai...

It must be remembered that even Empyrean Gods and Celestial Immortals were able to live for the incredibly long time of 108,000 chaos cycles. When Ning had been very young, he had acquired a prisonworld filled with Empyrean Gods and Celestial Immortals who had been alive for multiple chaos cycles.

However, Empyrean Gods and Celestial Immortals generally had very weak Dao-hearts. Very few would be able to live to their maximum lifespans, as most would end up developing mental issues that would result in their energies running wild, resulting in death. Most had to rely on using spirit-pills to nourish their bodies; only then would they be able to live long enough to hit the 108,000 cycle limit. Northmont Baiwei, for example, was merely a Pure Yang True Immortal, but he was still alive.

Another person Ning went to visit was Ninelotus.

Ninelotus was the first woman Ning had ever romantically loved. Ning’s status was so incredibly high that after they broke up, no one else ever dared to pursue Ninelotus! Ninelotus herself set up her own school long ago, and she only accepted female cultivators who swore to be forever single.

Ninelotus had vanished for many years after establishing her sect, but then she had suddenly skyrocketed in power. She had first reached the World level of power, then became a Samsara Daolord during the period of time that Ning was secluded in meditation. This caused many people in the Three Realms to feel quite speechless... and many secretly whispered that Fairy Ninelotus had to have reached this level thanks to Daolord Darknorth’s help. Otherwise, how could she have been ordinary for so long, then suddenly risen to power?

Ning himself, however, knew that he hadn't helped Ninelotus at all!

Below a giant tree within a courtyard. Ning and Ninelotus were seated facing each other, with Ninelotus pouring Ning some tea.

"I grew this tea tree myself and personally harvested the leaves," Ninelotus said. "Have a taste."

"Senior apprentice-sister Ninelotus." Ning smiled. "You truly amaze me."

Ning had seen many things. By now, he knew that there were indeed some cultivators who rose to prominence late in life! Common sense dictated that they shouldn't be able to make any further breakthroughs, given how long they had been alive for, but they somehow did. They just slowly advanced at their own pace.

"For a long time, you cast a deep shadow over my heart." Ninelotus looked at Ning. She could sense his true soul crumbling away, and she felt sorrow for him. He had been an extremely important man in her life, after all. "I eventually set up my own female-only school and strictly forbade my disciples from falling in love... but that's not something a mere rule can prevent. In the end, quite a few of my disciples ended up becoming Dao-companions with men from the outside world. After teaching many of them and seeing many things, the shadow over my heart began to gradually dissipate. I began to get over the past."

"I simply taught my disciples and tended to my garden, planting trees and weeding weeds. Every so often, I'd read a few treatises on the Dao." Ninelotus smiled. "Honestly, it was quite strange. For some reason, cultivation became easier and easier for me, and I began to improve faster and faster."

Ning could sense that Ninelotus' Dao-heart had reached incredible heights after she had managed to dispel the shadow that had bedeviled her heart for so many years. In the end, the Dao-heart was what mattered the most to cultivators!

Long ago, Ning had established a Dao-repository filled with countless techniques which all talented cultivators of the Three Realms were given access to. Many of those techniques had been written down by Hegemons

and included a detailed explanation from start to finish. This had allowed the Three Realms to produce more and more major powers.

“Junior apprentice-brother Ji Ning, the brightest star of the Black-White College... I felt certain that you would continue to dazzle long after I died,” Ninelotus said. “I never thought that I’d still be alive while you...”

“That’s why I had to come visit you, old friend.” Ning smiled.

“Is there hope?” Ninelotus suddenly asked.

Although the love between them had vanished long ago, she still cared deeply about Ning. Many failed Daolords refused to give up hope. Daolord Allgod, for example, had tried all sorts of methods to extend his life! The law of the universe was that the heavens always gave a chance, no matter how slim... and it was true! There was, in fact, a way for those who failed the Daomerge to survive. Alas, to this very day not even the Autarchs had been able to truly grasp it.

“I’ll enter terminal seclusion soon to find out,” Ning said with a smile. “If you ever see me again, you’ll know that I succeeded.”

“Then I’ll wait for you to come back. I’ll make sure to have some more tea ready for you,” Ninelotus said hopefully.

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Ning felt quite happy after leaving Ninelotus’ residence. He could tell from her breakthroughs that she had gotten over her previous issues. This was why he had been willing to visit her. If she was still entangled by the demons of the past, he wouldn’t have disturbed her.

He continued to wander the Three Realms, visiting all of his old friends. Finally, he hosted a family banquet in Brightheart Island. The only ones invited to the banquet included his parents, Brightmoon, Uncle White, Autumn Leaf, and other extremely close friends and family. Youji, Pillsaint, and Azurefiend were also permitted to attend as his retainers. Even the slumbering Flamewing God was awakened by Ning and called over to take part.

After the banquet ended, Ning was going to enter terminal seclusion.

“Flamewing,” Ning instructed, “Stay for a few hundred thousand more chaos cycles in the Flamedragon Realmverse. After that, you can go where you please.”

“You’ll definitely make it back, Master!” Flamewing truly couldn’t bear to part with Ning.

“Haha...” Ning chuckled, then turned to look at everyone else present.

“Ning. Son.” Yuchi Snow’s eyes were filled with worry.

“Young master.” Autumn Leaf looked at Ning as well.

Ji Yichuan and Uncle White looked at Ning. Both were able to remain fairly calm.

“Master.” Su Youji’s eyes were filled with anxiousness.

Ning looked at this gathering of the friends and family who meant the most to him, then smiled. “Relax, everyone. I’m going into terminal seclusion, not certain death. Besides, I’ve already lived a far longer life than ordinary mortals are granted. I’m an old fart by now! Alright. I’m off!”

As he turned to leave, he cast Su Youji a final glance and nodded towards her.

How could he not understand the feelings Su Youji bore him? Su Youji, in turn, knew how Ning felt and so she continued to ‘hide’ her feelings, never giving voice to them.

Ning had no answer for this, no solution. Mortals might be easily moved to love, but someone like Ning? At most, he could care about her as he would a beloved family member. As far as romantic love went... he truly felt nothing for her at all.

Whoosh. As Ning took a single step forwards, a dimensional tunnel appeared before him. He stepped into the dimensional tunnel, then vanished.

Everyone on Brightheart Island watched as Ning departed, their hearts filled with many emotions.

.....

“Master. Nuwa. If I truly do fail in my terminal seclusion, the security of the Three Realms will be up to the two of you.” Ning’s voice suddenly rang out in the minds of Subhuti and Nuwa.

Subhuti had been meditating, while Nuwa had been teaching students. Both were startled by Ning’s sudden message.

Ning hadn’t met with them before going into secluded meditation. He only sent them this single, simple mental message.

“Disciple,” Subhuti murmured softly.

“There is still hope.” Nuwa turned to stare into the void beyond the Three Realms.

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The Azureflower Estate was as same as it always was as the white-robed Ning stepped inside.

“Daolord Darknorth.” The white-haired elder had been waiting at the gates for quite some time now. He immediately bowed respectfully as Ning entered.

“Haha. You get to be the last one by my side as I enter terminal seclusion,” Ning teased.

“To accompany you in this is my honor,” the white-haired elder chuckled.

Ning turned to glance at the world behind him. He felt as though he could see the images of those who he cared about appearing outside.

“Close the gates,” Ning instructed.

With a rumble, the towering gates to the Azureflower Estate swung shut.

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RWX's Thoughts

I really liked this chapter and kinda wanted to end here instead of the two daily, but alas...

It was nice to get a few extra name drops and also that scene with Ninelotus was quite touching. To me, it finally completed an arc that started hundreds of chapters and many many chaos cycles ago.

Chapter 9: The Only Path: Void Everlasting

Far, far away, in the outer perimeter of the Sithelands. There was a floating island here which had an ancient temple on it. Inside were Autarch Mogg and the avatars of the other Autarchs.

“Autarchs, I wanted to let you know that I, Darknorth, am preparing to enter terminal seclusion. Let our various conversations and sharing of insights be paused for now! But of course, if you gain any extremely important insights, you can still go ahead and share them with me,” Ji Ning sent via the Autarch talisman to the other six Autarchs.

“Terminal seclusion?” Titanos, Ekong, Bolin, Skyfeeder, Stonerule, and Mogg all stiffened. They all felt a mixture of complex emotions in their heart, as well as a sense of sorrow. They knew just how difficult creating a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique would be. The six of them had spent a great deal of time in recent years on this technique, but they actually made much less progress than Ning. There were no important insights they could share with him.

“If we have any important insights, we’ll definitely notify you.” Autarch Bolin was the first to reply.

“Darknorth, you are the first and only master of an Eternal Omega Dao our Chaosverse has produced. I know you can succeed, no matter how hard the task,” Autarch Titanos said.

“There’s always a chance, no matter how slim. I know that you will seize it,” Autarch Skyfeeder said.

They all replied supportively, but although their words were filled with encouragement and they spoke of their faith in Ning, deep in their hearts they knew how slim Ning’s chances were. That was why they had to speak so supportively! Over the course of the past 15,000 chaos cycles, they had often exchanged insights with Ning regarding the [Deathless Chapter]. At first, they had been able to provide Ning with some new ideas, but later on

their rate of advancement became far slower than Ning's.

"Yes. I'll definitely find and seize that chance. I'm going into seclusion now." Ning sent one final reply, then fell silent.

The six Autarchs exchanged glances, then sighed.

"Ugh."

"Just like that, one of our good friends has..."

"Perhaps a miracle will happen." All of them felt saddened, and the atmosphere quickly turned heavy. Darknorth had been a dazzling figure, the first master of an Eternal Omega Dao their Chaosverse had produced. He had established a new path for future generations to follow, and now... all by himself... he was preparing to go out in a blaze of glory, fighting a battle which no one had ever won in a bid for survival. He had so many unfinished hopes and dreams... but alas, nothing in life would ever be exactly as one wished it to be.

The six Autarchs could do nothing but wait silently.

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Within a silent hallway. The white-robed Ning first drew all six of his Northbow swords from their sheaths, then placed them atop a nearby table. The elderly white-haired spirit of the estate watched silently from one side.

Ning then walked to the Autarch's stone dais, sat down in the lotus position, then slowly closed his eyes.

He had already settled as many affairs as he could. There was no point in worrying about the rest. He was now able to truly empty his mind of all extraneous thoughts and focus everything on creating the complete [Truesoul Everlasting] technique!

Creation of this technique was his one and only chance to survive. Of course, successfully becoming an Autarch via the Omega Dao was also possible, but by all rights that would require an enormous amount of work and time. He simply didn't have that much time left to him!

Rely on an epiphany? Epiphanies could only be hoped for, not counted on. Hoping for an epiphany that would propel him into Omega Autarchy was nothing more than a foolish pipe dream. He at least had a slim chance at surviving with a 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique, but his chances of surviving due to becoming an Omega Autarch were next to nil. If he had a million chaos cycles or more, he might be able to accomplish it with some luck and an epiphany, but as of right now? Forget it!

Besides... when entering terminal seclusion, one had to put everything at stake. The worst thing he could do was to allow himself to be distracted by other possibilities!

Ning knew that becoming an Omega Autarch in such a short period of time was far less likely than successfully developing the 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique. Thus, he didn't hesitate at all in choosing the latter option! He had made this choice 15,000 chaos cycles ago, and he didn't hesitate at all as he entered terminal seclusion.

This path was illuminated by the [Deathless Chapter] of the [Five Truncheon Chapters], which in turn represented Hawkfang's distillation of the Sithe Chaoslord's insights as represented by the nine techniques he had created. Ning had joined them together with all of the insights pertaining to this Chaosverse which he had gained over countless years, as well as the insights of Autarch Awakener. Without question, it was the path most likely to succeed!

"A 'Truesoul Everlasting'... there are two paths to success which I can take. The first is that of the 'Void Everlasting', while the second is that of the 'Chaos Everlasting'."

Ning began to ponder this most important of questions. "What should I choose? Once I make the decision, I'll have to follow it to the bitter end."

During previous aeons, he had pursued multiple paths at the same time. Autarch Awakener had believed that the two most likely paths were those of 'Void Everlasting' and 'Infinity Everlasting'. The latter followed the most fundamental principles of Daoist cultivation, and was based on the principle of how 'one begat two, two begat three, and three begat all

things.’ The principle was basic, but actualizing it was difficult. Ning had finally abandoned this approach by chaos cycle 12,000. As for the other paths, he had abandoned them at other intervals as well.

Now, only two paths remained which Ning felt would have the highest chances of success.

“The Void Everlasting... it involves using my will as the core. I would need to be able to maintain my will and consciousness in the emptiness of space itself. Even after my truesoul shatters apart, I would still be able to remain conscious and could then use the empty void of space itself to serve as the medium for remaking my truesoul anew.”

“The Chaos Everlasting... it involves trusting my will to the prime essences of the Chaosverse themselves. I would borrow from the power of the Quintessence, asking it to halt its instinctual desire to swallow my truesoul. If I can do that, my truesoul will naturally stop crumbling.”

Ning continued to ponder this decision. The ‘Void Everlasting’ required him to rely on himself, while the ‘Chaos Everlasting’ involved him swaying the prime essences and convincing them to ease drawing upon his truesoul.

Why did the truesoul continuously shatter and break apart? Because the prime essences would begin pulling at it after the first cracks appeared during the Daomerge.

“The Void Everlasting technique works in theory, but I haven’t sensed it actually function in practice,” Ning mused. “As for Chaos Everlasting, I can sense its effects. I’ve tried numerous times to link my will to the prime essences and have been able to use this technique to slow down the rate at which it absorbs my truesoul... but as soon as I halt the technique, the prime essences will continue to swallow my truesoul at the normal rate once more.”

The first technique seemed ineffective, while the second one did have some effects. Which one should he choose?

Ning gritted his teeth. “To completely prevent the prime essences from devouring my truesoul fragments would be to go against the natural order

of the Chaosverse! The only reason why my technique seems to be effective is because right now, this Chaosverse has no Lord governing it.” Ning shook his head. “However, my chances of completely halting this process remain very low.”

He understood this point from the very beginning. To go against the natural order of the Chaosverse was not a wise option. The only reason he had yet to abandon it was because it did seem to at least have some effect.

“I can’t leave things to luck, nor can I try and have ‘backup’ options. Void Everlasting it is!” Ning made his final decision, deciding to focus all of his efforts on embarking upon the path of the Void Everlasting.

.....

The [Void Everlasting] technique was a completely self-reliant technique. It required him to be able to maintain a ‘void will’. Only then would he have successfully acquired a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’!

What did the phrase ‘void will’ mean? The word ‘will’ referred to his mind, to his consciousness! For ordinary mortals, possessing a soul meant possessing consciousness. Powerful cultivators understood that only possessing a complete truesoul represented having consciousness and the capability for true thought.

As for the most supreme of major powers? Even if their truesouls were fragmented and shattered, they would still be able to maintain consciousness! A major power’s mind and consciousness would only come to a halt when the final fragments of his truesoul completely collapsed. When Ning’s original body had perished, he had experienced this process of his truesoul breaking apart and his consciousness dimming away. The reason that consciousness vanished was because its most fundamental vessel, the ‘truesoul’, had completely broken apart.

To have a ‘void will’ meant that even after your truesoul completely broke apart, you would still be able to maintain consciousness, housing it within the emptiness of the void itself! Imagine what a powerful will one would need in order to be able to accomplish such a thing!

If his will was sufficiently powerful, he would be able to play tug-of-war

with his truesoul fragments, forcibly latching onto them even after his truesoul had broken apart and preventing them from dissipating. He would draw them together into a new whole! In order to accomplish this, the power of his will would have to surpass the absorptive power of the Chaosverse itself. Only then would one have a 'Truesoul Everlasting'!

Chaos Everlasting required one to be able to convince the Chaosverse to temporarily halt the absorption process, while Void Everlasting required one to use one's will to overpower the energy-sucking strength of the Chaosverse.

"Willpower strong enough to exist independently of body and soul... to accomplish this, I will need to truly perfect the [Void Everlasting] technique," Ning mused to himself.

.....

Ning was going all-in on this final gamble, and he completely threw himself into researching this technique.

Time continued to flow on. He continuously tested out new theories, but each time he failed. There was no effect at all on the dissolution of his truesoul, but he didn't let himself grow dispirited. Instead, he drew from these experiences and continued to perfect this technique, pushing in one new model after another.

He failed a billion times. Ten billion times. A trillion times. If he was a mortal, he would've abandoned himself to despair long ago.

Ning, however, remained as calm as a still pond of water. Everything was as he had expected.

A thousand chaos cycles went by in the blink of an eye, and he was getting close to the very end. A million years. A hundred thousand years. Ten thousand years. A hundred years. One year. One month...

He now had very, very little time remaining.

Chapter 10: The Final Gamble

One month. Ten days. One day. One hour...

Ji Ning learned from each of his failures, drawing upon those experiences as he worked hard to further perfect the technique. Slowly, the 'Void Everlasting' technique began to take some effect, dramatically strengthening the power of his consciousness. However, he still wasn't even close to being strong enough for his truesoul to resist the siren song of the prime essences of the Chaosverse.

"Northbow."

Ning was seated next to a table, pouring himself a cup of wine. He had chosen to spend his last hour of life drinking wine and relaxing, releasing all of the tension that had built up over a thousand chaos cycles in one fell swoop.

"Master." Sad-faced children had appeared on the surfaces of all six Northbow swords. They looked despondently at Ning.

"Number one, number two, number three, number four, number five... and number six." Ning called them all by 'name', then smiled: "After I finish this cup of wine, I'll go try one last time. If I fail, it'll all have been for naught. The six of you are, without question, the deadliest swords in all the Chaosverse, the only swords powered by the Eternal Omega Sword Dao. Once I'm gone, you will be ownerless. Go and find owners which suit you."

"Master."

"We won't choose anyone else! We only want you, Master."

"You'll definitely survive, Master." All six of the sword-spirits were unwilling to part with Ning.

"You can also choose to take human form and just rove the Chaosverse," Ning said. Given how powerful the Northbow swords were, they could easily choose to take human form, while their natural power was enough to heavily injure even Hegemons. If they wanted to flee from someone, not

even an Otherverse Lord would be able to catch them. Bind them by force? That would be even harder!

“No.”

“You’ll definitely succeed, Master. We want to stay by your side forever.” All six of them were crying.

Ning looked at the six little children, a smile playing on his face. “When I see the six of you, I feel satisfied with what I accomplished in my life.”

Ning lifted up the tankard of wine, drinking it all down in one gulp before rising to his feet.

“Let me congratulate you in advance, Daolord, for you shall surely complete the technique and gain a Truesoul Everlasting.” The white-haired spirit of the estate had been watching silently this entire time. Upon seeing Ning rise, he came forward and bowed respectfully.

“Complete the technique and gain a Truesoul Everlasting!” all six sword-spirits chorused.

“Haha. Yes, a Truesoul Everlasting! I shall indeed.” Ning walked over to the Autarch’s stone dais, then sat down in the lotus position. His truesoul was on its last legs now, and he didn’t have any time to waste. The remaining fragments of his truesoul were so weak that they could very well completely collapse as soon as Ning attempted to use this truesoul technique!

“The final gamble! If I fail, I die. If I succeed... a new world will begin.” Ning closed his eyes and began to ruminate on ways he could further perfect the [Void Everlasting].

Just ten seconds later...

Rumble... Ning’s shuddering truesoul began to come together in a final attempt. Ning’s powerful consciousness reached out, seizing to forcibly pull the dissipating truesoul fragments back into shape... but the call of the prime essences was simply too hard to resist. Alas... this final attempt caused the final shards of his truesoul, which had been just barely able to hold onto a basic framework, to finally and completely break apart!

“I failed?”

“So in the end, I still failed...” Ning opened his eyes, and a peaceful look was in them. His eyes, his skin, his body... every inch of him began to crumble apart and vanish away like sand blown away by the wind.

All the remaining fragments of his true soul finally and truly broke apart in a complete and utter collapse. Countless spots of light which began to fly out of Ning could be seen with the naked eye... and then, Ning’s entire body transformed into an enormous, human-shaped mass of light.

“Daolord.” When the white-haired estate-spirit saw this, a look of grief appeared in his eyes. A truly peerless Daolord, the very first Daolord to master an Eternal Omega Dao, had just passed away.

“Master.” The six sword-spirits stared frantically at the humanoid mass of light.

It was like a dazzlingly beautiful flame... but hidden behind its beauty was the sorrow of a peerless Daolord’s passing.

Whoosh! Ning’s light-body split apart into countless specks of light that quickly began to shoot out in every direction.

“No...” the sword-spirits sobbed.

.....

Within that ancient temple located in the outer perimeters of the distant Sithelands. Autarch Mogg and the avatars of the other Autarchs remained gathered here as always. Suddenly, all of them fell silent and began to exchange glances with each other.

“Darknorth.” The six of them could sense through their message-talismans that the one belonging to Daolord Darknorth had just lost its master.

.....

The Three Realms. Nuwa was responsible for administering many matters here, while Subhuti spent most of his time training by himself within his Daoist monastery inside Mount Innerheart.

Brush. Brush. Brush. Subhuti was sweeping the floor of his monastery. He was the only person in this entire monastery. Not even the two novices stationed outside would enter without a very good reason.

Subhuti had already trained to an extremely profound level, and he put particular emphasis on training his Dao-heart. In this, he was second only to Ning and Nuwa.

After he finished sweeping the floor, he entered another room and began to wipe down the pillars and the tables. As he did so, he raised his head to glance at a lamp located atop the highest table. The light of the lamp blazed away like a tiny little bead of flame.

This was a heartlamp, Ning's heartlamp! In all the Three Realms, only he and Nuwa had a way to know whether Ning was alive or not. Ning's parents, Brightmoon... their Dao-hearts were too weak. Ning was worried that if they found out that he died, they wouldn't be able to keep it completely secret.

"Mm." When Subhuti saw that the heartlamp was still lit, he couldn't help but smile. He usually cultivated in this very room. That way, he could glance at the heartlamp whenever he wished. Whenever he saw that the heartlamp was still lit, he would feel a sense of relief in his heart.

After wiping down the tables, he turned to sit down upon a nearby prayer mat and began to meditate. But just a short while after he began his meditations...

"Eh?" Subhuti suddenly shuddered. He quickly opened his eyes and turned to look at the highest table, as though he could sense something was amiss. The light coming from that heartlamp was quickly dwindling away... and the sight of it disappearing was like a bolt of thunder that came crashing into Subhuti's mind, completely stunning him.

"Subhuti!" Nuwa's slightly frantic voice echoed within his mind: "Ji Ning, he...!"

"My student..." Subhuti's old eyes began to redden as a hint of tears appeared.

He had accepted many disciples in his time, and some had caused him quite a bit of trouble. Ning had been a fairly unremarkable disciple, one who Subhuti hadn't spent too much effort on. Ning's later accomplishments, however, had truly impressed Subhuti. Subhuti had come to view this disciple as he would his own son. He knew that this disciple of his had worked many miracles in the past, and he had felt so certain that another miracle was in the making...

"Ji Ning," Subhuti murmured softly. The old man shut his eyes as tears began to fall down his face.

But... right at that moment. 'Pop'. The heartlamp had clearly been extinguished... but suddenly, flickers of flame began to appear within it as it lit up once again.

Subhuti was a Daolord of the Fourth Step. He was naturally able to sense what had just happened, and he immediately opened his eyes, not quite daring to hope that his senses were telling him the truth. That heartlamp... it remained lit, as it had been over the course of countless aeons. It was as though it had never dimmed at all.

"B-b-b-but..." Subhuti was completely stupefied. He had never imagined that a heartlamp could be extinguished, then reignited!

Once the truesoul was destroyed, the heartlamp would no longer be able to sense it, at which point it would become extinguished. Now, however, it had been reignited. This meant that the truesoul was back to normal again, but... how was this possible?

"Subhuti, did your heartlamp suddenly light up again?" Nuwa sent mentally. She was in a state of joy mixed with disbelief as well.

"It is lit! Lit!" Subhuti sent frantically.

.....

Within the second hall inside the Azureflower Estate.

Rumble... countless specks of light began to gather together, coming to form a humanoid shape.

In the instant of his truesoul's destruction, Ning finally felt what true death was like. All of his truesoul fragments had completely dispersed, losing all cohesion.

He felt nothing but emptiness... as though he was drifting within a world with no time, no space, and no color.

The various 'Void Everlasting' techniques he had theorized in the past were not able to allow Ning's truesoul to resist the call of the prime essences, but they had still strengthened Ning's consciousness dramatically. Even as his truesoul broke apart, he didn't immediately lose all consciousness the way an ordinary Daolord might. Instead, his consciousness entered an extremely faint and sluggish state. He couldn't sense either space or time... all he could sense was complete and utter nothingness, the emptiness of the void.

"This is what the void truly is..." Suddenly, Ning's sluggish consciousness was awakened to the truth. In this instant, he truly understood what 'emptiness' meant, what the 'void' truly meant. Only now was he able to understand how to entrust his consciousness to the void, and his [Void Everlasting] technique immediately transformed on its own accord. At the same time, Ning's feeble consciousness immediately began to pull at his countless dispersing truesoul fragments. As he continued to follow the principles of the [Void Everlasting] technique, his consciousness suddenly began to grow much more powerful, skyrocketing to unprecedented heights.

"VOID... EVERLASTING!" A powerful will suddenly manifested, and it let out a psychic scream of such power that it could actually be heard audibly. It was a cry filled with power, a cry of indomitable resolve.

When this shout rang out within the room, it caused the sorrowful white-haired elder and the six sword-spirits to all stare in astonishment. They watched as the countless specks of light which had been flying every which way to suddenly freeze in midair as a powerful force suddenly pulled at them, connecting them together. The countless specks of light seemed to come alive as they came forward to form a complete whole.

They no longer had a truesoul holding them together in an established framework, but they somehow still remained bound to each other!

“MERGE!” Yet another shout echoed within the room.

Those frozen countless specks of light instantly began to gather together once more. They quickly reformed into a humanoid blob of light, and that blob of light quickly crystallized in appearance.

Once again, the white-robed Ning appeared within the room. He carefully inspected everything around him, then gently reached out to touch the table next of him. The cool, slick touch of the table made him smile.

The white-haired elder and the six sword-spirits were all unspeakably excited. His truesoul was now Everlasting... which meant that ‘Daolord Darknorth’ was about to become ‘Emperor Darknorth’!

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RWX's Thoughts

FINALLY! Sheesh.

Chapter 11: Emperor Darknorth

“What’s with those silly looks on your faces?” Ji Ning glanced at the six sword-spirits and the white-haired elder: “Come, let’s drink!”

Ning wasn’t in a rush to connect with the outside world just yet. He wanted to be by himself for a while.

“Alright,” the white-haired elder said excitedly.

“Woohoo!” The six sword-spirits were quite excited as well. Treasure-spirits at their level all possessed keen senses of sight, smell, and taste. It was quite common for powerful treasures to transform themselves into human form and live in the mortal world.

Wine was quickly poured for all. Ning’s smile only broadened as he lifted up his wine cup and gave it a sniff, letting the pleasing aroma of the wine seep into his soul. He glanced at the crystalline liquid within his cup, then murmured softly, “Being alive feels wonderful.”

He looked very calm, but inside he was unspeakably excited. He had succeeded! He had actually succeeded in overcoming the greatest tribulation he faced. Although he had behaved quite placidly before others, he knew just how tiny his chances of successfully creating the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique were. He had mentally prepared himself for death, which was why he had gone to visit so many of his old friends and even Ninelotus. He wanted to empty his mind of all distractions and leave nothing behind.

“Now that I’ve created the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique, I can make repeated attempts at the Daomerge.” Ning smiled. “However... I personally don’t need to. I can easily succeed in the Daomerge and become an Emperor.”

“An Emperor with an Eternal Omega Dao... I can reach this level whenever I want to. Now, it’ll be much easier for me to deal with the Sithe.”

He had always been extremely strong thanks to his Eternal Omega Dao,

but he had never dared to truly launch a wild barrage of attacks! Autarch Mogg and the other autarchs could launch tens of thousands of attacks in a split second, allowing them to overpower and crush everything in their path. The only place which made them a bit nervous was the heart of the Sithelands, but they were able to handle it by pouring a large amount of energy in casting a seal over that place.

Dangerous, eh? Then I'll seal you inside and make it impossible for you to leave. Just rot there!

Autarchs were unimaginably powerful. The only problem was that there simply were not enough of them. If they had dozens of Autarchs, the Sithe would've been defeated long ago!

"Once I become an Omega Autarch, I'll be able to bring her back to life." Ning lifted up his wine cup, his gaze distant. He could still remember with absolute clarity the life they had enjoyed together. Having the chance to bring Yu Wei back to life was the greatest source of joy he felt.

He knew that actually becoming an Omega Autarch would be extremely difficult, but at least there wouldn't be any fatal roadblocks in the way that could derail him. So long as he was given enough time and continued to slowly build up his experiences, with a bit of luck he would sooner or later suddenly gain an epiphany and break through.

"I'm willing to wait as long as it takes. As long as we're able to meet again, it'll all have been worth it." Ning began to blissfully fantasize about their reunion. It had been a long time since he was this happy.

Suddenly... beep! "Eh?" Ning sensed something happen. He waved his hand, producing a dark-red jade talisman within it. This was the Autarch message-talisman. He was able to sense the location of the other six through it, and even sense their very auras.

"Darknorth, just now we sensed that your talisman suddenly lost its aura... but now, the aura is back. Have you created the 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique?" Autarch Titanos asked. All six of them had thought that Ning was dead... but now, Ning's talisman had suddenly regained its aura. This caused them to feel rather stunned.

It must be remembered that very few of these talismans had ever been made. Only the Autarchs were in possession of them! No one else but Ning would be able to bind the one he had been given, which meant that if the talisman had Ning's aura about it, the only explanation was that Ning had to have created the 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique.

But... they had to ask. Just to be sure.

"I succeeded," Ning replied.

"Ahahaha! Darknorth, I knew you would succeed!" Autarch Ekong said excitedly.

"Darknorth, from this day forth, you must join the six of us in bearing responsibility for overseeing and safeguarding all cultivator civilizations as well as the very Chaosverse itself." Autarch Bolin was fairly calm, but his words and his meaning were clear. Now that Ning was no longer in danger of losing his truesoul, there would no longer be any limits on his power. For all intents and purposes, he was now a true peer of the Autarchs.

"Congratulations, Darknorth! Our civilization has finally given birth to an Omega Dao Emperor. You know, I've been thinking about this for quite some time. In the past, the most powerful Emperors were always called 'Hegemons', but you became an Emperor through an Omega Dao. What should we title you?" Autarch Skyfeeder teased in a relaxed manner. She was in a wonderful mood as well.

Before Ning's sudden rise to power, she had been planning to follow Autarch Awakener's path and try to take control over the Quintessence of the Chaosverse, but she knew that her chances were slim and that she was almost guaranteed to perish in the attempt. Now? Now, there was no need for her to take that risk.

"I think we should call him Autarch Darknorth!" Autarch Ekong said immediately.

"But... he's only an Emperor. If we call him Autarch Darknorth now, what are we supposed to call him once he actually becomes an Autarch?" Autarch Stonerule jested.

“Well, by then he’ll be the Lord of Chaos!” Autarch Ekong laughed loudly. “Hey, Darknorth? Get a move on it! You are the first creator of an Eternal Omega Dao this Chaosverse has ever seen, and you were also the first to create a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique. The rest of us would submit to you if you became the one to bind the Chaosverse, but what if it ends up being someone else? In the future, there will be many juniors who will make use of your experiences in treading the path of the Omega Dao. If one of them ends up becoming an Omega Autarch before you do and then takes control over our Chaosverse, we’ll be annoyed and you’ll be embarrassed! But of course, there’ll be nothing we could do by then.”

Ning was speechless for a moment, then snorted in laughter. The Autarchs were bombarding him with messages. He didn’t even know how he was supposed to respond!

“The title doesn’t really matter. We don’t need to worry about it too much.” Finally, Ning was able to compose a reply. “And... I think it is best if we kept this a secret for now. That way, we can deal the Sithe a nasty, unexpected blow at just the right moment.”

“Right.”

“I agree. Let’s keep this a secret for now.” Autarch Titanos and the others all agreed with this proposal.

“Then that means you have to keep staying in hiding for now, Darknorth. Ugh. You made such a huge breakthrough, but you still have to be so low-key about it. That’s no fun,” Autarch Ekong muttered.

“I wouldn’t say I have to be ‘in hiding’. Given my mastery over the art of illusions, the Sithe Exalts wouldn’t be able to recognize me even if I stood right in front of them,” Ning said. “Later on, I’ll pay a visit to the Quintessence. Let’s chat a bit then.”

“Alright.”

“Let’s meet at Skyfeeder’s place.”

“See you all at Skyfeeder’s.” The six Autarchs were all in a wonderful mood. Their civilization had just gained another protector who could

battle by their side as an equal. This meant their entire Chaosverse had just risen considerably in power... and Ning might one day advance to become an Omega Autarch!

.....

A short while later, Ning re-initiated the Daomerge process. This time, things were completely different. Ning didn't need to make any preparations at all, he just sat there by his table, drinking his wine as he initiated the Daomerge.

His body was perfect, as were the Jindan chaos region and the Dao-tree inside. Once again, the Flower of Eternity began to bloom.

"The Flower of Eternity." The aura of the Daomerge began to flood outwards, but the seals protecting the Azureflower Estate were able to mask it all and keep it contained.

The thick, towering Dao-tree was 540,000 meters tall. It gave birth to a dazzlingly beautiful flower bud which glistened with beads of dew formed by countless flashing illusions of sword-stances. This was a Flower of Eternity which was born from the Eternal Omega Sword Dao, a flower which was far more beautiful than the ones which ordinary Emperors and Hegemons could produce.

Rumble... the prime essences of the Chaosverse descended upon Ning, whispering in joy and delight. Ning could sense their happiness, which contrasted with the sorrow they 'felt' the last time they descended upon him.

"It seems I'll have to make a visit to the Quintessence if I wish to make a breakthrough with my heartworld," Ning mused. His Immortal energy could easily evolve from Daolord-level energy to Emperor-level energy, as the amount of energy needed could be provided by the Azureflower Estate, even though Ning's Immortal energy was far purer than that of ordinary Hegemon's. It was on the level of the Autarchs! His heartworld, however, would be another matter.

The next breakthrough he made in heartforce would result in his heartworld becoming incredibly realistic! In addition, it would expand

once more to become the size of an entire realmverse.

A realmverse-sized heartworld that was semi-real... to form such a thing would require an absolutely enormous amount of energy. If Ning simply sat here in the Azureflower Estate and tried to draw in enough energy from the surrounding area, it would probably result in destruction on a vast scale that would damage even the Three Realms. In fact, the entire Flamedragon Realmverse would probably be shaken! If that happened, there would be no way he could hide his breakthrough.

His only choice was to go to the Quintessence, where energy was so plentiful as to be nearly limitless. Only then would Ning be able to form his heartworld with ease.

“So this is what it feels like to be an Emperor?” Ning’s godsense had evolved as well, gaining a whiff of eternity about it. His godsense was now as stable and far-reaching as an Autarch’s.

Whoosh. Ning’s godsense spread out silently and soundlessly, easily reaching out past the Azureflower Estate and almost instantly reaching out through space and time to cover the entire Flamedragon Realmverse!

He was now able to monitor an entire realmverse with but a thought. The Brightshore Kingdom, the Dao Alliance, Vastheaven Palace, the Three Realms... all of it was under Ning’s watchful gaze.

Ning was also able to see his friends, his family, and his disciples.

Chapter 12: Reunion

Ji Ning's godsense was omnipresent and all-encompassing. Every single speck of dust within the Flamedragon Realmverse was plainly visible to Ning's gaze. Nothing could escape it.

"Ah, the Sithe gave up?" Ning was able to quickly scan all of the Emperors and Daolords within the entire Flamedragon Realmverse. The only ones present were the ones he knew. Ning worried that the Sithe would use their techniques to disguise themselves as individuals he was familiar with, and so he double-checked through karma just to be safe.

"It seems Autarch Stonerule scared them off when he captured all of their spies." Ning smiled.

This actually was in fact the case. With Autarch Stonerule personally keeping watch over the Flamedragon Realmverse, how could any spy escape? As many spies the Sithe sent, as many spies the Autarch captured. Daolords might be able to confuse him, but they were so weak that they wouldn't really be able to find out anything important. Thus, the Sithe leader Iyerre had chosen to give up and instead prepare his other plans.

"Master. Nuwa." Ning simultaneously reached out via godsense to both his master and Nuwa.

"Disciple." Subhuti was overjoyed.

"Darknorth." Nuwa finally let out a sigh of relief when she heard Ning's voice.

"I've created the 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique and succeeded in the Daomerge. I am now an Emperor," Ning sent. "I'll be coming back soon. Don't worry about me."

"Truesoul Everlasting? Emperor? Good, good, good!" Subhuti was unspeakably excited. His student was now an Omega Emperor!

"I can finally relax a bit now," Nuwa said with a laugh. "I've been worried for years that the Sithe might come, and so I kept a vigilant watch without ever relaxing. Now that you've broken through, Darknorth, things will be

much simpler. I don't think the Sithe would be able to get anywhere near the Three Realms without you noticing."

.....

Ning could sense how excited his master and Nuwa were when he sent them word. Not just them – Ning himself remained ecstatic!

"Time to recreate an avatar." Ning rose to his feet. Now that he was an Emperor, he naturally had to remake his avatars.

At his current level, it would be simple to create even Universe-class treasures. It must be remembered that of the many Universe treasures which lay scattered throughout the Chaosverse, only a tiny portion had been created by actual Hegemons, and mostly through luck at that. The vast majority were created by Autarchs. Autarchs were able to create entire otherverses, after all! All they had to do was infuse a weapon with just a hint of their Daos and a new Universe treasure would have been born.

Ning's truesoul had been crumbling, and so he didn't dare to expend his Immortal energy on creating new treasures for himself. Now, however, creating a Universe treasure was simplicity itself. He could create new weapons which were close to the Northbow swords in power, then fill them with the Eternal Omega Sword Dao as well. The Northbow swords, however, would still be stronger because they were Ning's original Lifeblood weapons. He had nurtured them for many years, and they had grown alongside him. Without question, they shared a higher level of affinity with Ning.

Newly created weapons might have the Eternal Omega Sword Dao within them, but they wouldn't have as high a level of affinity. Thus, they would only be 'close' to the Northbow swords in power... but of course, they would still surpass the vast majority of other Universe treasures. With them in hand, Ning's avatar would have close to 80% of Ning's power! This represented another Autarch-class combatant.

Whoosh! Boom!

Within Ning's estate. Ning had set up a large formation to help him

create his avatar, and he had poured a large number of resources into the forging. The wind howled through the formation as thunder came crashing down again and again upon a giant boulder. The left side of the boulder was covered by boiling red lava, while the right side was covered by a freezing blue liquid. One side hot, one side cold; Ning was using a combination of elements for the forging of his avatar.

At Ning's current level, treasures were ubiquitous and meaningless. Weaker Emperors and even Hegemons would generally start with a weak but flawless avatar, then use time to slowly nurture it and empower it. Ning, however, elected to start off by using the finest ingredients. That way, the avatar would grow more quickly.

Three years went past in the blink of an eye. The boulder was now perfectly round and semi-translucent, and a humanoid figure could be seen seated inside of it.

"Come out," the white-robed Ning barked from next to the boulder. Boom! The round boulder cracked open, followed by a youth who looked identical to Ning flying out of it. Moments later, a layer of golden robes formed across the youth's body.

"Greetings, real Ning." The golden-robed Ning bowed.

"Greetings, avatar Ning." The white-robed Ning chortled as well.

The two shared the same mind and shared the consciousness. Ning was just playing around by speaking to himself.

Whoosh. Whoosh. The two simultaneously left the estate-world they were in, returning to the private room within the Azureflower Estate. When the white-haired spirit of the estate saw them appear, he immediately realized that one of them was an Avatar.

"Time to go visit Autarch Skyfeeder." Ning pondered for a moment, then turned to look at the white-haired elder: "I'm planning to bring the Azureflower Estate along with me. Any objections?"

"Emperor, since you were able to create a 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique, I'm sure that you'll be able to create the Tenth Chaos Seal with

ease,” the white-haired elder said with a laugh. “My master built this estate because he wanted to produce a dazzlingly talented successor... but you, Emperor, are far more impressive than what my master ever would’ve dared to hope for! You can do whatever you want to this Azureflower Estate.”

Ning nodded.

“Emperor, the Hegemons and Emperors within the Azureflower Estate have been trapped here for countless aeons. They might’ve made some mistakes in the past, but I think it is time to release them,” the white-haired elder said.

Autarch Awakener had long ago promised that when this estate finally gave birth to the mighty successor he hoped for, the bound Hegemons and Emperors would be granted their release. They had been trapped by countless oaths and spells that compelled them into a golem-like existence, but the process was a reversible one that was completely different from what the Sithe used to ‘tame’ their enemies.

“Easily done.” Ning immediately exerted his will, binding and taking control over the entire Azureflower Estate. He then sent out the power of his Illusion Sword Dao into the minds of the imprisoned Hegemons and Emperors, wiping out any and all memories pertaining to ‘Ji Ning’!

After the Hegemons and Emperors regained consciousness, the only thing they heard was Ning’s voice echoing within their minds: “Immediately swear lifeblood oaths not to divulge any information at all regarding the Azureflower Estate, and you’ll be granted your freedom.”

The Hegemons and Emperors instantly grew excited. Freedom? Their endless days of imprisonment had finally come to an end? Without hesitating at all, the Hegemons and Emperors instantly swore the required lifeblood oaths.

“You can go now.” Ning dissolved all the other bindings on them, then casually ‘tossed’ them out of his Azureflower Estate through spacetime tunnels, scattering them throughout the Sixteen Realmverses Alliance!

“Get in here.” Ning then drew the entire Azureflower Estate into one of

his holding treasures. The most valuable thing within the Azureflower Estate was the Autarch's stone dais. Even at Ning's level of power, it would take him an extremely long period of time and many precious materials to create a similar dais. He didn't have the time to waste on something like that! However, the stone dais was the nexus of the entire Azureflower Estate; if he wanted to ensure its marvelous effects remained active, he would have to take the entire estate along with it.

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Whoosh. After the estate disappeared, the local spacetime continuum went back to normal. The white-robed Ning put his black scabbard on his back, then used his Spacetime Sword Dao to tear a tunnel straight towards the Quintessence of the Chaosverse. He was now able to move far faster than he had in the past; even amongst Autarchs, he ranked close to the top in speed.

"Now, back to the Three Realms." The golden-robed Ning returned to the Three Realms. This avatar-body was perfectly built; it had been 'born' with 50% of Ning's power, and as time went on it would improve at a fairly fast rate.

The Quintessence. Within the massive sea of prime essences.

Within a wooden cottage which 'floated' within this sea. The seven most supremely powerful leaders of the cultivator civilizations were gathered in this cottage – the six Autarchs and Ji Ning. The other five Autarchs and Ning had all come in person, while Autarch Mogg had sent his avatar.

"Ahahaha! I'm in such a good mood right now. Our civilization has finally gained another Autarch-class figure!" Autarch Ekong roared with laughter. "I must say, Omega Daos really are awesome. Darknorth, Titanos told me that your mastery of spacetime is second only to Mogg's and Skyfeeder's? And that your prowess in illusions is second only to Stonerule's?"

"I simply infused the Dao of Spacetime into my Dao of the Sword," Ning said. "The only reason they are so strong is because my Eternal Omega Sword Dao is fueling them."

As he infused more and more Daos into his Dao of the Sword, Ning was beginning to become extremely well-rounded. For example, Autarch Stonerule was the master of the 'Illusion Daobirth Essence'; Ning's Illusion Sword Dao was naturally inferior to it, but superior to the techniques of the other Autarchs.

Mogg and Skyfeeder had respectively mastered the 'Space Daobirth Essence' and the 'Time Daobirth Essence'. Ning's mastery of spacetime was second only to the two of them.

As for actual combat prowess? The Dao of the Sword was a Dao meant for combat. Even amongst Autarchs, it stood at close to the apex of power.

"We're only skilled in one aspect each; it is very, very hard to gain a second Daobirth," Autarch Bolin sighed. "I have spent countless years ruminating on the nature of life and death, but I've only made modest gains in this regard. You, however, are able to continue to improve your mastery of many other Daos. I truly do envy you, Darknorth."

"Darknorth, you've only been training for a short period of time. I imagine there are many areas which you can still improve on, right?" Autarch Titanos asked.

Ning nodded. The Dao of Karma, the Dao of Numerancy, the Dao of Formations... he had yet to infuse any of them into his Dao of the Sword. There was indeed a great deal of room for improvement.

"The reason why I didn't want to make my status public was partially because I want to keep training, under 100x temporal acceleration, for another 10,000 chaos cycles. That translates into 1,000,000 chaos cycles of training time, and I should be able to improve significantly during that period of time. It would put me in a better position to deal with the Sithe," Ning said.

"Hm. 100x temporal acceleration? That's way too slow. Skyfeeder?" Autarch Titanos looked at Autarch Skyfeeder. "We'll have to ask you to help Darknorth out."

"Very well. I can grant you 1000x temporal acceleration," Autarch Skyfeeder said.

Ning was surprised and delighted to hear this. He had reached the Autarch level of power; accelerating time for him was extremely difficult! Ning himself was able to maintain a rate of 100x while keeping his power consumption stable. 1000x? That would be far too difficult.

“We’ll do it here in the Quintessence, where the energy reserves are limitless. It’ll cost me half of my energy reserves, but I’ll be able to maintain a rate of 1000x temporal acceleration for you.” Autarch Skyfeeder looked at Ning, then smiled: “The rest of us have long ago hit our limits. There’s no way for us to grow stronger, but you are a different story. If you can improve, you need to do so as quickly as possible. None of us can be sure when the Sithe will launch the final war.”

“Alright.” Ning nodded. If he was given 1000x temporal acceleration, he would have more than enough time to achieve his goals.

Chapter 13: A New Type of Energy

Rumble...

The awesome energy of the prime essences was pooled here in vast, interconnecting lakes. There was a lake filled with the prime essence of lightning, a lake filled with the prime essence of destruction... the different lakes all represented different prime essences, and together they formed the vast sea.

The power here was truly limitless.

A white-robed youth was standing in the center, surrounded by the lake filled with the prime essence of water. Boundless amounts of energy poured towards him and were all absorbed in turn.

“Stonerule, Darknorth’s heartworld is probably on par with yours,” Autarch Ekong chuckled. The six Autarchs were standing next to each other and watching from afar.

“His heartworld was formed using the Eternal Omega Sword Dao as the focus. Of course it is in par with mine!” Autarch Stonerule said. He was the only one of the six who had an Autarch-class heartworld.

“I really envy you guys,” Autarch Titanos sighed.

“You? Envy me? I envy you!” Autarch Stonerule smirked.

“Titanos, at least you once were a Heartforce Emperor! The rest of us weren’t able to truly stabilize our heartworlds at all,” Autarch Skyfeeder said. “And you control the mighty Karma Daobirth Essence; in terms of power, you are the strongest of us six. How can you have the audacity to say you envy us? I’m hurt! Hurry up and bring out your finest food and wine as compensation.”

Autarch Titanos stared at her wide-eyed. “Are you kidding? It took me ages to build up my collection. Don’t even think of touching it.”

Heartforce Cultivators had to follow a different path in making their breakthroughs. Those who followed other Daos would reconstitute their divine power and Immortal energy, but Heartforce Cultivators relied on

expanding their heartworlds. The more stable a heartworld was, the larger it could become and the more powerful the Heartforce Cultivator would be.

Once the entire heartworld became large and stable enough to become perpetual, the Heartforce Cultivator would be able to step into the Emperor level! This was why almost all Heartforce Emperors had reached Hegemonic levels of power. Stabilizing a heartworld enough to make it eternal was extremely difficult! The ones who succeeded were almost all Hegemons, with just the tiniest of fractions being at the Archon level of power.

Of course, there were many who dabbled as Heartforce Cultivators. Bertulu, Winesage, Ning... all of them trained both as normal cultivators and as Heartforce Cultivators. This was generally true for all truly talented cultivators!

Early on, Autarch Skyfeeder had trained as a Heartforce Cultivator as well. However, after she completed the Daomerge and gained Hegemony via the Dao of Time, she discovered that her Dao of Time was not a Dao that could produce a stable, perpetual heartworld. She had thus been forced to abandon the path of heartforce, and after 108,000 chaos cycles her unstable heartworld came to a natural end.

Of the living Autarchs, Autarch Titanos was the most powerful. He had reached Hegemony via the Dao of Karma, and his Dao of Karma was capable of allowing his heartworld to become eternal. In other words, he had been both a Karma Hegemon and a Heartforce Hegemon! Alas, when he made the breakthrough which enabled him to become an Autarch, his heartworld wasn't able to expand alongside any further. He too was forced to abandon the path of heartforce as he allowed his Dao of Karma to transform into the Karma Daobirth Essence.

"Omega Daos really are the best," Autarch Titanos sighed. "Only Omega Daos can be considered truly perfect Daos. Even the heartworlds formed by them are the best."

"Yes, only Omega Daos can allow for truly perfect heartworlds," Autarch

Stonerule said. His Illusion Daobirth Essence allowed for his heartworld to reach the Autarch level, but his heartworld still couldn't be considered 'perfect'. This was why he remained slightly weaker than Autarch Titanos.

The Azureflower Estate was floating right next to Autarch Skyfeeder's wood cottage within the vast sea of prime essences. Autarch Skyfeeder had begun the process of keeping time accelerated at a rate of 1000x for the entire Azureflower Estate, while Ning trained within the second hall inside.

He had already finished his heartworld breakthrough. Now, it would be a slow process of training.

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Back in the Three Realms.

"Whew. I've finally finished." The golden-robed Ning stared at the six golden swords before him, a pleased smile on his face. He had spent over fifty thousand years to create these swords, and the materials he had used were superior to the ones which had been used to create the original Northbow swords! Back then, Ning had been comparatively weak; how could he possibly acquire as many precious materials as he had now? The materials he now had were far superior to what was available back then. If Ning wasn't such a perfectionist, he would've been able to complete these six Universe weapons within just a thousand years.

"Unfortunately, they haven't been developing by my side for countless aeons like the Northbow swords. I've done as much as I can, but they are still a teensy bit weaker than the Northbow swords." The golden-robed Ning smiled. "Still, they are more than good enough for killing Sithe. From this day forth, you shall be named... the Northmoon swords."

Swish. Swish. Swish. All six golden swords flew into the sheath on Ning's back. He was now dressed in golden robes, carried golden swords on his back, and had a body formed from so many precious materials that it was comparable to Universe treasures in strength.

"Time to expand my heartworld." The golden-robed Ning took a single step forwards, then departed from the Three Realms and reappeared

within the Great Dark just outside the Flamedragon Realmverse.

Although the Great Dark was quite distant from the Three Realms, the golden-robed Ning still released his godsense and kept it spread across the entire Flamedragon Realmverse. The Sithe danger was all-encompassing, and Ning didn't want to let his guard down.

"Let it begin." The golden-robed Ning began to expand its heartworld as well. Here in the Great Dark, he was able to draw upon a large amount of energy from an extremely wide region with impunity. Ning had already scanned this part of the Great Dark to ensure that there were no living creatures here.

"At this rate of absorption, it'll take me roughly thirty billion years to finish expanding my heartworld." The golden-robed Ning sat down within the endless Great Dark, beginning to slowly train as he absorbed power from within it.

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Time flowed on like water. Over 120 chaos cycles went past in the blink of an eye.

"I've finally completed the Tenth Chaos Seal." The white-robed Ning had a smile on his face as he turned to glance at the nearby white-haired elder: "Autarch Awakener would probably be ecstatic, were he still alive."

"Master's final wishes have finally been completed." The white-haired elder was extremely excited.

"Let's start." Ning immediately began to use the perfect, complete technique on himself. The previous azureflower technique he had used was incomplete and flawed. Autarch Awakener had actually fixed those flaws in his private version, but had intentionally released a flawed version in order to separate the gold from the dross.

"Out with the old..." With but a thought, Ning sent his will descending deep into his sea of consciousness, where an azure flower was slowly swaying. When Ning's will descended, the flower suddenly began to decay and break apart. A moment later, the azure flower had completely

vanished within the sea of consciousness.

“...and in with the new.” Ning began to redeploy the true, complete, and perfect technique. It was now suitable for even Autarchs to use, although Ning wasn’t completely sure as to whether or not it could convert Autarch-level divine power and Immortal energy.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. The various chaos seals began to manifest within Ning’s sea of consciousness. Ten of them appeared in succession, and they began to interlay atop of each other, solidifying into an azure seed.

The azure seed popped open as a sprout emerged from it. The sprout began to grow, resulting in a series of dazzlingly beautiful leaves appearing, with a little closed bud appearing in their midst. The bud slowly grew larger and larger, and it looked as though it was opening up but not quite ready to fully bloom just yet. The beautiful azure flower emanated an aura of ineffable mystery, and it was many times more dazzling than the previous one. It gently swayed there in Ning’s mind, surrounded by countless green leaves.

This was the perfect azureflower technique which arose from the Ten Chaos Seals.

Strands of divine power, Immortal energy, and heartforce all flowed into the azure flower, which was able to easily take them in and then transform them into a new type of energy. As soon as this new type of energy was created, Ning felt extremely comfortable.

Whoosh. Under Ning’s control, this new type of energy quickly filled every inch of his body. Crack! Pop! Ning’s muscles, tendons, and blood began to change and transform.

This was a new form of energy, a perfect form of energy that vastly surpassed divine power and Immortal ki. As a result, it could be used to create a more perfect body as well! It could be used for close combat, could control magic treasures from afar, and was incredibly strong.

Ning’s physical body was quickly remade by this new form of energy. He withdrew his Immortal ki back into his Jindan chaos region, leaving only

this new energy pulsing through his veins.

“This is the new type of energy which Autarch Awakener hoped for. I shall call it...” Ning paused for a moment, then smiled. “Mana.” He opened his eyes, his entire body feeling clean, refreshed, and comfortable as the mana flowed through him. This new power, mana, was a thousand times stronger than Emperor-class divine power or Immortal ki. When he used mana to execute his Eternal Omega Sword Dao, the power of his strikes would probably increase by another twenty to thirty percent.

The reason it ‘only’ increased by that amount was because at Ning’s level, the power of one’s attacks was chiefly determined by one’s insights into the Dao. Personal strength only played a fairly minor role. For ‘mana’ to improve an Autarch’s power by 30% was absolutely incredible!

“Mana... so it has finally been completed.” The white-haired elder was very excited. “Master was unable to perfect it, and so he never even came up with a real name for this new type of energy. Now, it has finally been completed.”

From this day forth, ‘mana’ was born. In the future, it would slowly be spread throughout the Chaosverse and supplant divine power and Immortal ki as the most important type of energy a cultivator could train in.

Completing the Ten Chaos Seals had been fairly easy. Now, Ning would need to go into deep meditation to work on his other Daos.

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After 360 chaos cycles in secluded meditation, Ning fused the Dao of Light into his Sword Dao and created the Light Sword Dao.

After 430 chaos cycles in secluded meditation, Ning mastered the Dark Sword Dao.

After 3,200 chaos cycles in secluded meditation, Ning learned how to fuse his Dark Sword Dao together with his Light Sword Dao into a new technique he named the Cycle Sword Dao.

After 11,100 chaos cycles in secluded meditation, Ning fused the Dao of

Formations into his Sword Dao and created the Sword Formation Dao.

Ning continued to fuse one Dao after another into his Dao of the Sword. Finally, after 3,900,000 chaos cycles, Ning successfully integrated his Dao of Karma into the Dao of the Sword and created the Karma Sword Dao. This took Ning the most time of all to complete.

Chapter 14: The Calm Before the Storm

Ji Ning continued to train, and nearly 6 million chaos cycles went past in the blink of an eye. Autarch Skyfeeder continuously maintained a rate of 1000x temporal acceleration for the Azureflower Estate.

One day, the gates to the estate suddenly swung open. The white-robed Ning walked out, black sheath over his back, and Autarch Skyfeeder halted the temporal acceleration process.

“You’ve finished?” Autarch Skyfeeder left her wooden cabin and walked barefoot through the air towards Ning.

“Thank you for everything, Autarch Skyfeeder,” Ning said gratefully.

“A minor matter. The stronger you become, the better off the entire cultivator civilization shall be,” Autarch Skyfeeder said with a smile. “And besides, it only took me 6,000 chaos cycles of real time. That’s nothing to me.”

“It was 6,000 for you, but to me it was 6 million,” Ning said with a sigh. It truly had been an extremely long period of time for him, and he had experienced it in its entirety. He had completely focused on cultivating, having emptied his mind of all other thoughts.

In the end, he had successfully mastered everything he wanted to master. The most time-consuming had been the Karma Sword Dao, and it had taken him nearly 3 million chaos cycles to complete it. Next was the Numerancy Sword Dao, which should’ve been just as difficult, but since he had already mastered the Karma Sword Dao he had managed to speed up the process a bit and had completed it in roughly 2 million chaos cycles.

Karma and Numerancy... both were extremely difficult to master. All the other Daos were simpler, with some taking a few dozen chaos cycles at most.

“How did your training go?” Skyfeeder asked.

“I’ve advanced as much as I can,” Ning said. “Based on my theories, I should be able to merge all the other Daos into the Autarch-level Omega

Dao, but as of right now I still don't know what that breakthrough would look like."

"Going from Emperorhood to Autarchy has always been a difficult task," Skyfeeder said with a smile. "Everything shall be as fate wills it. Based on what I know, the Sithe Chaosverse actually has quite a few Omega Emperors of the Sword, but all of them have remained trapped at that level."

"Makes sense." Ning nodded. He had reviewed the memories of many Sithe Emperors, and so he had come to learn quite a few things. All information regarding the Omega Daos themselves had been sealed, but there had been a few memories regarding the Omega Emperors. This was why he had come out of cultivation. It was probably impossible to become an Omega Autarch through secluded meditation. In fact, it was actually more likely that this breakthrough would come naturally as one lived an ordinary life! The Dao could be found in all things, after all, as all things were linked together.

It was true that putting yourself in a life-or-death situation could be even more effective, but then you ran the risk of failing and dying. The Autarch's generally wouldn't put themselves in such great danger without a very good reason, because their deaths could destabilize the entire cultivator civilization. In fact, it would impact the entire Chaosverse itself!

"Oh, right. I used Autarch Awakener's original energy-cultivation technique to create an even more profound one," Ning said. "Anyone can train in the new [Azureflower] technique and use it to convert divine power, Immortal ki, and heartforce into a new type of energy! This will greatly strengthen both body and soul. Give it a try, Skyfeeder. Let's see if the technique is capable of transforming Autarch-class divine power and Immortal ki."

"Autarch-class?" Skyfeeder felt rather excited at the prospect.

"I'm not sure if it'll work," Ning admitted with a chuckle, "But it was able to transform mine, so perhaps it'll be able to transform yours as well."

"Let me give it a try," Skyfeeder said eagerly. At their level, it was

extremely difficult to become even a tiny bit more powerful than before.

Ning handed over a jade slip. Skyfeeder accepted it, then memorized the information within it. This technique was extremely profound, but it only encompassed ten seals and so the amount of information needed to express it wasn't too excessive. It was truly a highly refined and distilled technique. The Ten Chaos Seals were capable of transforming into countless other seals, but so long as you memorized the ten basic seals themselves, you would have memorized the entire technique.

Rumble... the awesome energy of the Quintessence suddenly parted, avoiding the area around Autarch Skyfeeder as her aura gradually began to change. Her very skin seemed to flicker with light. Clearly, her body was being reconstituted.

A short while later, she turned to smile at Ning. "It can indeed convert Autarch-level divine power and Immortal ki, purifying both to a great degree!" As she spoke, she waved her hand, causing spacetime around her to twist into knots. She nodded slowly. "When I use this new energy to activate my Time Daobirth Essence, the power is increased by 30%. I can also sense that my soul and truesoul are more stable as well, while my body is now comparable to Universe treasures."

Previously, her body had been created through divine power. Now, her body was created by the far more distilled energy known as 'mana', making it just as tough as a Universe weapon. The same was true for Ning's body as well.

"Hurry up and inform Titanos and the others about this amazing technique," Autarch Skyfeeder said hurriedly.

"I was planning to, I just wanted to let you try it out first, Skyfeeder." Ning smiled, then immediately notified the other five Autarchs through the message talisman.

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Soon, all the other Autarchs came rushing over. Autarch Mogg, of course, only sent over his avatar. Ning provided them each with a complete set of the [Azureflower] technique, and they all found that after

their energies were converted, they were now 30% more powerful than they had been in the past.

“Awakener had slaved away at this technique for so long... and now you, Darknorth, have finally completed it.” Autarch Titanos let out a sigh. “All of us have grown stronger thanks to this technique. Now that we also have a ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique, the cultivator civilizations shall be able to produce far more Emperors and Hegemons in the future. Given enough time, we’ll probably see many new Autarchs as well.”

“Time is exactly what we don’t have,” Autarch Mogg said. “If we had another ten million chaos cycles, sure; we’d probably have a large number of new Hegemons and maybe even ten new Autarchs. But I doubt we’ll be given that chance.”

The ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique would allow some truly talented figures who had failed the Daomerge due to having made the tiniest of errors a second chance at the Daomerge. If they succeeded the second time, they would become Hegemons. The more Hegemons the Chaosverse had, the more Autarchs would eventually be born as well.

“There’s no way the Sithe would just sit idly and watch our Chaosverse grow that much.” Autarch Stonerule frowned.

“Screw them. We’ve locked them all away!” Autarch Ekong said. “Sure, we suspect that they might be able to escape our seal, but even if they have, the fact that they have still been biding their time instead of attacking means that they are planning something else. Let’s start teaching these techniques to as many deserving cultivators as we can. If we can produce more and more powerful experts, the Sithe will grow restless and might end up launching their attacks ahead of schedule, before they are truly ready.”

“I agree. Let’s force their hand,” Autarch Titanos said. “If they really are sealed away, we’ll have nothing to fear and can use this opportunity to grow stronger; if they aren’t, we’ll disrupt their plans. Either way, we win.”

It didn’t matter if the Sithe were truly sealed away or not. They could not delay the teaching of the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique any longer.

“For Daolords who have failed the Daomerge, the sooner they begin using the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique the better,” Ning said. “If they wait until their truesoul actually breaks apart before trying to fuse the pieces together, it’ll be extremely difficult.”

Ning was the creator of the technique and understood it better than anyone else. He also had a perfect Dao-heart. This was why he had been able to reverse even the complete collapse of his truesoul! The vast majority of Daolords, however, had far weaker Dao-hearts than Ning. If their truesouls collapsed, not even the [Truesoul Everlasting] technique would necessarily be able to save them.

“Haha, I don’t think anyone would be dumb enough to actually wait until their truesoul collapsed before using the technique, right?” Autarch Titanos said.

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Ning and the others eventually went their separate ways, returning to their various residences. Ning went back to the Three Realms, living a life of ease and comfort. He didn’t spend too much time analyzing the Dao of the Sword. Instead, he emptied his mind and purified his soul, spending his time on calligraphy, art, and gardening.

After 1,200 chaos cycles... Ninedust attempted the Daomerge. He succeeded on his very first try! He didn’t even need to use the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique Ning had prepared for him. Ninedust had built up an incredibly deep and stable foundation before attempting the Daomerge. Not only had he used a Voidsea Jade seal, Ning had also given him many techniques and an Incense-Spirit Fruit!

Ning quietly went to visit Ninedust by himself, offering his congratulations. The fact that he was still alive remained a secret! Ning’s success meant that their Chaosverse had just gained two new Autarch-class combatants due to Ning having such a powerful avatar. More importantly, Ning was different from the other Autarchs in that he was skilled in many different areas. He had his Spacetime Sword Dao, his Karma Sword Dao, his Cycle Sword Dao, his Numerancy Sword Dao, and

more.

This made Ning practically flawless, able to cope with any situation. Two new Autarch-class combatants who had no flaws at all... once they were unleashed, they would definitely give the Sithe a nice big 'surprise'.

After congratulating Ninedust, Ning went back to the Three Realms and continued his relaxed life. The Otherverse Lords and Hegemons in every single realmverse were all granted the 'Truesoul Everlasting' technique, and they were told to secretly teach the technique to deserving Daolords who had failed the Daomerge. Without exception, they were admonished to try and keep this hidden as best they could. The longer they could hide this from the Sithe, the better!

Time slowly continued to flow on... but roughly 3,100 chaos cycles after Ning's return to the Three Realms, the peace within the Chaosverse was shattered at last!

Chapter 15: The Engine of Destruction

Within Autarch Titanos' residence. Nine strange parts were hovering in the air within his private study, and Autarch Titanos was frowning thoughtfully as he analyzed them. Even the two fleshy antennae on top of his head were drooping in a pensive manner.

Autarch Titanos had spent more time studying and understanding Sithe treasures than anyone else in this entire Chaosverse! He knew more than any other cultivator, and he had created quite a few weapons based off of those treasures, some of which were suitable for cultivators to use. Autarch Titanos was eagerly anticipating the creation of even more. "Harrumph! We are no longer the cultivators of old. We have many unique weapons of our own now, and even our ordinary Emperors are far more difficult to deal with than the ones of the past."

Each Autarch followed a different, separate path. Autarch Titanos was the master of the Karma Daobirth Essence, which was arguably the most difficult Dao aside from the Omega Daos. As a result, he was the best-suited for ruminating on difficult, complex mechanisms. He spent his time creating many unusual weapons, allowing their Hegemons and Emperors to unleash tremendous power in battle. This would make it much more difficult for the Sithe to slay the Emperors of this Chaosverse.

If he could raise the overall power of their forces, they would have a greater chance at gaining victory in the upcoming war... and the countless aeons he had spent in research had resulted in many splendid achievements indeed!

"Eh?" The two fleshy antennae on top of Autarch Titanos' head suddenly shot up straight, and a sharp look flickered through his eyes. "This is..." Autarch Titanos could vaguely sense that the entire Quintessence was somehow in grave danger. An invisible, destructive force had suddenly cast a shadow over the entire Chaosverse.

"Destruction... the destruction of the entire Chaosverse?" Autarch Titanos turned slightly pale. "The source of this destruction is coming

from that direction!”

Long ago, the Quintessence had sent a similar warning to all of the Autarchs, ensuring that they knew how dangerous the ‘Sithe’ were. Now, for the second time, they had received this warning!

“Could we be facing a new threat, something aside from the Sithe?” Autarch Titanos was slightly panicked. There was no way the Quintessence’s warning could possibly be in error, and so he abandoned all of his experiments and immediately exited his laboratory, then tore a tunnel through spacetime towards the source of the danger.

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The handsome but sorrowful-looking white-haired Autarch Bolin was standing in a wild, untamed land. He stared at the earthen dwelling before him and the mortals inside of it. There were a total of three children within.

“Now these kids are rather interesting. Are you ready? Ready to transcend life and death and become a brand new, powerful type of creature?” Autarch Bolin looked at the oldest child, the nine-year-old, with a hint of anticipation in his eyes. He had just prepared a new... experiment.

Autarch Bolin had spent many aeons treading the line between life and death, scrying the mysteries of this great cycle. He hadn’t come close to mastering the Samsara Daobirth Essence, but he had other plans he was focused on.

He wanted to create a truly perfect lifeform! The Aeonians had been one of his many experiments, but they weren’t truly perfect. He wanted to create perfect beings which were on par with Sourcewalkers and Chaos Primordials in might. If the cultivators could produce a large number of ‘perfect’ beings and allowed them to propagate, they would have gained a powerful new army which made battling against the Sithe easier.

Suddenly, Autarch Bolin’s face turned pale. “Danger?” He immediately abandoned his new experiment. He could sense on a subconscious level that the entire Quintessence was shivering in terror, as though a terrifying

destructive force had just appeared in front of it which could tear it apart.

The prime essences of the Chaosverse were awesome and powerful, but they were also quite weak. This was because they weren't truly sentient, nor were they able to defend themselves. Thus, they had to rely upon the Autarchs and the cultivators to protect them against the Sithe. Once the cultivators were defeated, the Quintessence would be like meat on the chopping block for the Sithe to butcher as they pleased.

Whoosh. Autarch Bolin immediately tore through spacetime and departed.

.....

Within the Three Realms. Brightheart Island. Ning was seated facing Autumn Leaf. The two were playing chess, while Brightmoon was watching from nearby.

"Hm." Autumn Leaf pondered her next move.

Ning held a small black gourd in his hand. Every so often, he would take a swig from it. After Autumn Leaf finally made her move, he casually made his own move as well. After mastering the Numerancy Sword Dao, Ning was arguably the number one master of Numerancy and divinations in the entire Chaosverse. Perhaps Autarch Titanos, who was the master of the Karma Daobirth Essence, might be on par with him, but no one else! Chess? Of course Ning couldn't play too seriously. If he did, it'd ruin the whole game.

"Aunt Autumn Leaf, that's not right! If you do that, you are going to be in serious trouble." Brightmoon shook her head, reaching out to prevent Autumn Leaf from making the move she wanted to make.

"Then what should I do next?" Autumn Leaf immediately pulled her chess piece back.

"Ahem! For a bystander to remain silent is the way of gentlemen." Ning glanced sideways at Brightmoon, then looked at Autumn Leaf. "And since when did we allow take-backs in chess?"

"I didn't put my piece down yet. It doesn't count as a take-back,"

Autumn Leaf said immediately.

“And I’m not a gentleman, I’m a woman!” Brightmoon rebutted.

Speechless, Ning chose to continue drinking his wine instead of arguing. The two of them would wrack their brains over every move while he just played casually, but he’d still win nine out of ten games. This was on purpose, of course. If you won every time, who would be willing to play with you?

“Brightmoon, when are you planning to begin your Daomerge?” Ning asked.

“Not anytime soon,” Brightmoon said. “It’ll definitely be after Patriarch Subhuti.”

“After we finish this game of chess, I need to talk to you about something,” Ning said. He was planning to transmit the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique to her. Right now, they were extremely cautious and careful in transmitting this technique, generally only teaching it to the most incredibly talented Daolords of the Fourth Step. In each case, they would require the Daolord to swear a lifeblood oath which would cover many things.

For example, the Daolord could only attempt the Daomerge in a place where his or her aura would be completely hidden. That way, in the event that the Daolord failed the Daomerge and had to use the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique to repair his truesoul, no one would be the wiser. In fact, no one would even know that he had attempted the Daomerge! This was the best way to keep things secret.

In short, they did everything they could to keep this hidden from the Sithe. They’d hide it for as long as they could! They knew that once the Sithe spies found out that the cultivators possessed the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique, they would immediately be able to guess that Ning was still alive.

There was really nothing they could do about this. They couldn’t keep the ‘Truesoul Everlasting’ technique hidden from all cultivators just to ensure that Ning’s continued survival remained a secret, right? This was a

technique which would strengthen civilization as a whole.

“Eh?” Ning suddenly frowned midway through his next move. Given the power of his godsense and his connection to the prime essences of the Chaosverse, he was naturally able to sense a terrifying danger suddenly manifest... a danger which could very well destroy the entire Quintessence itself.

“What’s going on? Has another civilization aside from the Sithe invaded us as well?” Ning turned pale.

Whoosh! The golden-robed Ning which had been roving the outside realm almost instantly tore through spacetime and hurried towards the source of the danger. The golden-robed avatar now had only 80% of the true Ning’s power, but it must be remembered that when compared, Ning was now at least 60% stronger than he was back when his truesoul was crumbling! This was because he had first gained Emperor-class energy, then transformed it into mana! After another six million chaos cycles of cultivation, he had infused many new Daos into his Sword Dao. As a result, the avatar-Ning was now much more powerful than ‘Daolord Ning’ had been.

In terms of raw power, Ning was ranked at the top of the list amongst the Autarchs. Even Autarch Titanos was slightly inferior to him, as Titanos wasn’t as well-rounded as Ning was! Ning’s avatar was terrifyingly strong.

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The weaker cultivators felt nothing at all; the only people in the Chaosverse who sensed the danger were Ning and the six Autarchs, and all of them arrived. Autarch Mogg sent his avatar as he needed to stand guard over the Sithelands. The other five Autarchs all left their avatars in the Sithelands and came in person. Ning was extremely confident in his own power, and so he sent his avatar as well.

In truth, Autarchs would generally send their avatars to deal with any dangerous situations. This was because if the avatar died, they could easily remake a new one! If their true bodies died, the Autarchs would be dead for good.

Riiiiip. Ning tore through spacetime and arrived in a place within the Great Dark. He immediately saw Autarch Ekong.

“Darknorth.” The muscular Autarch Ekong was dressed in his usual loose robes. He had been the first to arrive, as he had been the closest to this location. Ning was the second to arrive.

“What’s going on?” Ning strode through the void towards him.

“There’s no one here save us.” Autarch Ekong pointed off into the distance. “The danger is coming from over there.”

Ning could sense it as well. Far off in the distance, there was an enormous silver vortex that was slowly swiveling in place. This silver vortex was so gigantic that it was vastly greater than an ordinary realmverse in size. Ning was able to see through to the very center of the silver vortex, where he saw a giant, ancient sphere-shaped object that was the size of a realmverse. It was riddled with countless holes, but Ning was unable to see through them to the insides of this sphere. All he could sense was that it was filled with boundless danger.

The giant sphere simply sat there in the darkness, furiously devouring the primordial chaos around it. The silver vortex around it represented all of the energy which it was draining from the surrounding area. Even the endless darkness itself was being swallowed up by it.

Just looking at the thing caused Ning and Autarch Ekong to feel a sense of dread.

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RWX's Thoughts

I kept silent the previous release because I wanted to see what everyone's reaction was to 'mana'. In raws the term was 元, which is basic AF to use a modern colloquialism. Other novels call it 'Yuan power' or 'essence power' or 'Origin power'. I ended up deciding on mana because mana is just as 'basic' as 元 is in Chinese... but it also shares the commonality in that in the game(s) which made it popular, such as MTG or Diablo, all spells are powered by mana (albeit colored mana in MTG),

much like how in DE it shall replace Immortal ki, divine power, godsense, etc. and be the 'one true energy'. That, and I thought it'd be a nice little throwback to Ning's origin from Earth; we don't get nearly as many of those as I'd like. What do you all think?

Chapter 16: Going Inside

“Where did this thing come from?” Ji Ning stared at the titanic sphere located at the very center of that giant silver vortex. At his level, he was able to see at a glance that this terrifying celestial object was the source of the threat to the entire Chaosverse.

Everything within the Chaosverse, be it the emptiness of space, the endless Great Dark, or the countless living beings, were all part of the Chaosverse. In life and in death, they remained parts of the Chaosverse. Their deaths would not weaken the Chaosverse.

However... if their energies were somehow swallowed away, this would in fact harm the prime essences! The Sithe, for example, wanted to kill as many Autarchs and Hegemons as possible, then draw away their truesoul fragments and cause the prime essences to weaken. After the Chaosverse was weakened to a sufficient extent, the Sithe would have a chance at binding and controlling the entire Chaosverse.

All things were part of the Chaosverse. Destroying and devouring the souls of ordinary mortals would also weaken the Chaosverse, but doing this would be too slow and inefficient! The Sithe soul-eater technique could only be used to swallow truesouls that had been destroyed in extremely close proximity. It would probably take the Sithe tens of millions of chaos cycles to slowly do this to the countless living beings in a single realmverse!

This was why they had chosen to act against the Autarchs and the Hegemons instead. And now? This hole-riddled, realmverse-sized sphere was swallowing away even the darkness of the Great Dark! It was somehow devouring the darkness in a way that completely destroyed it, causing the Chaosverse to forever lose its energy.

This wasn't an issue in the short term, but given enough time it would cause the Chaosverse to suffer grave injuries, and possibly even weaken the prime essences enough for the Sithe to bind them.

“Where the hell did this terrifying celestial object come from? Who

made it?” Ning was puzzled.

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Eventually, the other Autarchs began to arrive as well. All of them stared at the behemoth sphere for a long period of time.

“Its enormous and riddled with holes, almost like a beehive,” Autarch Titanos said. “Its powerful aura reminds me of the aura of the Sithe heartlands! It was that very aura of danger which made us hesitate to go inside and instead opt to seal it away. This thing reminds me of it.”

“Yes, but there are some differences between it and the Sithe heartlands,” Autarch Stonerule said. “The Sithe heartlands hold an energy generator which powers many of their Daoguard Towers. This mysterious hive, however, is continuously swallowing and destroying the energy of the surrounding area! The more it swallows, the more our Chaosverse loses and the weaker our Chaosverse becomes.”

“Why did it suddenly appear here? There’s no way our Chaosverse would’ve naturally given birth to such a terrifying thing,” Autarch Skyfeeder said.

“This is a Sithe trump card,” Autarch Titanos said.

“The Sithe?” Ning and the others all turned to look at Autarch Titanos.

“Are you absolutely certain?” Ning asked. “Can it possibly be from another civilization?”

“It is Sithe,” Autarch Titanos said with absolute certainty. “I’ve spent countless aeons analyzing Sithe weaponry. As soon as I took a close look at it, I could tell that this behemoth hive is actually a single vast weapon! It was created for the express purpose of devouring and destroying the energy of the Chaosverse, which would cause the Chaosverse to weaken.”

“How can anyone create such a gigantic, powerful weapon?” Autarch Bolin asked.

“It is overwhelming. I can feel that it is on a completely different level from Exalt-class Daoguard Towers. Not even the strongest Sithe weapons

we faced during the Dawn War could even come close to comparing with this thing.” Autarch Mogg found it just as hard to believe that this realmverse-sized object was a manufactured weapon.

“The Sithe heartlands contain an energy generator which powers their Daoguard Towers,” Autarch Titanos said solemnly, “While this titanic, terrifying weapon also holds an energy generator within it, which is what allows it to function and forcibly tear away energy from the Chaosverse and devour it. That’s why I said it reminded me of the Sithe heartlands.”

Ning and the others were all rather shocked. The Sithe heartlands had been created at incredible cost. This thing before them was apparently on the same level of power?

“The Sithe have been biding their time for countless aeons. We should’ve expected their first move to be an extraordinary one,” Autarch Bolin said with a grim smile.

“We’ve been making preparations ever since the last war concluded. It seems the Sithe have kept themselves busy as well,” Autarch Stonerule agreed.

“Let them come. We’ll handle anything they can dish out.” A murderous look flickered through Autarch Mogg’s eyes. The danger which had just manifested before them had stirred all of the Autarchs, awakening their combative instincts which had lain dormant for so long.

The final war against the Sithe had yet to truly begin, but the Sithe had already made an absolutely terrifying opening gambit!

“We have to destroy it, and we need to move fast,” the golden-robed Ning said. “But... how? I can vaguely sense that this behemoth hive is filled with tremendous danger. Even if all seven of us go, we still wouldn’t necessarily be able to successfully deal with it.”

“The behemoth hive is definitely dangerous.” Autarch Titanos glanced at the other six. “And what if the Sithe suddenly launch the war after our avatars go inside and then are somehow trapped? Only half of our total combat power would be available to fight in the war, and we could very well be defeated.”

“Right.”

“We can’t all go inside! We need to be ready for the war to breakout.”

“How many of us should go inside?” The Autarchs and Ning began to discuss this matter.

Adding in their avatars, they had a total of fourteen Autarch-class combatants! Based on their previous experiences, they had to have at least ten Autarch-class combatants in order to keep a handle on the situation and not be caught flat-footed. However, given how long the Sithe had been biding their time, it was entirely possible that they would unleash something completely unexpected. Even ten Autarch-class combatants wouldn’t necessarily be enough.

“Let’s send in two to take a look,” Autarch titanos said. “That way, we can still be at close to peak power if the war breaks out.”

“Who should go inside?”

“I’ll go inside!” Ning was the first to volunteer.

“You, Darknorth?” Autarch, Titanos, Bolin, and the others all looked towards Ning.

Ning stared at the enormous silver vortex and the behemoth hive at its heart. “We don’t know anything about what this thing holds or what dangers might be present. We’ll probably have to destroy the entire thing in order to stop it! Of the seven of us, I am the most well-rounded and am the best at dealing with unknown dangers. I have some skill in every single Dao.”

Titanos and the others all nodded in agreement. Ning was very well-rounded and was quite skilled in every Dao. He had mastered even the Karma Sword Dao and the Numerancy Sword Dao. He was indeed the best of them in dealing with unexpected dangers.

“Very well.” They all nodded in agreement. Without question, Darknorth was going to be one of the two to go inside. He would be given the primary responsibilities for destroying this behemoth hive.

“I’ll go as well.” Autarch Mogg smiled. “I’m the master of the Space Daobirth Essence and have the keenest understanding of how space works. I’m the best at scouting out nearby dangers.”

None of the other five Autarchs disputed this. They all agreed once more. Everyone knew where their respective skills lay and who would be most effective in dealing with this behemoth hive.

“The other Autarchs should all return to their respective stations and prepare for war to break out at any time,” Autarch Titanos said.

“Darknorth and Mogg, send in your avatars! I’ll stay here to stand guard and keep a watch on things, to prevent anything unexpected from happening.”

“Very well.”

“It is settled.”

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Ning and Mogg had both sent their avatars to this place, and so all they had to do was make some minor preparations before flying together towards that silver vortex. As for the other five Autarchs, they watched from afar as Ning and Mogg flew off into the distance. The five only departed after seeing the two safely enter the vortex.

“I hope they can destroy that thing,” Bolin said.

“Even if they cannot, they have to stop it from functioning,” Autarch Titanos chuckled. “I’m confident in Darknorth’s skills. Even if he fails, he should be able to get a clear sense of what lies within that behemoth hive and how it operates.”

“Right.” Ekong, Skyfeeder, and Stonerule all nodded. They could all vaguely sense that after 6 million chaos cycles of training, Darknorth was now most likely the strongest of them all... and he was also the most well-rounded!

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Space twisted around the golden-robed Ning and the tall, thin, azure-

robed, scale-faced Mogg as they continued to fly forwards through a dimensional tunnel that led into the silver vortex.

The gigantic silver vortex was filled with apocalyptic power. Only Exalt-class beings would be able to just barely be capable of surviving this place. However, Mogg's dimensional tunnel was quite stable and it brushed aside all the power which clashed against it.

"Almost there." They continued to fly through the silver vortex, the behemoth hive slowly growing in size as they moved closer and closer towards it.

The countless tunnels covering the hive were dark and unfathomably deep. All forms of energy which entered those tunnels vanished without a trace, never to be seen again within this Chaosverse.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Ning and Mogg both descended towards the surface of the behemoth hive. The hive was protected by layers of frenzied, semi-translucent energy which furiously assaulted the two of them, but they were brushed away before they even got close. Ning and Mogg landed on the icy surface simultaneously.

This enormous weapon, the size of an entire realmverse, was so vast that ordinary Hegemons and Emperors couldn't even see it in its entirety. Ning's gaze transcended spacetime, and so he was able to see it clearly.

Chapter 17: Autarch-Class Creatures

Ji Ning and Mogg were in no hurry to immediately rush inside the behemoth hive. Instead, they flew across its surface and began to inspect it.

Ning and Mogg were able to cross hundreds of billions of kilometers almost instantly, and they continued to fly for a full hour as they reviewed the hive up close. The hive's surface was a mixture of dark black mixed with silvery white. Black was the main color, but some strands of silvery-white energy had crystallized in certain regions. As for the tunnels, they ranged from being a hundred kilometers wide to a trillion kilometers wide.

Ning and Mogg came to a halt and descended upon the surface once more.

"We can't see anything from outside," Ning said. "It seems we'll still have to go inside to take a look."

"My senses are telling me that the interior isn't uniform in nature. We can't simply blink in and out of it," Mogg said. "Our only choice is to accept the risk of flying inside."

The two knew that the insides of this behemoth hive were undoubtedly very dangerous. The gloomy darkness was capable of swallowing all forms of energy. Any godsense or heartworld projection energies would be swallowed as well, making it impossible to scry what was inside. They had been hoping to first learn what they would be facing, but they still knew nothing after that long inspection of the surface.

"Let's go inside." They chose an ordinary-looking tunnel that was a hundred million kilometers in diameter. There were countless tunnels like this across the surface of the behemoth hive.

Ning and Mogg stood at the edges of the tunnel, staring downwards. It was still furiously swallowing energy at an astounding pace. Ning and Mogg exchanged a glance, then flew downwards.

Whoosh! They quickly began to descend into the dark depths.

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The golden-robed Ning held two Northmoon swords at the ready as he began to rapidly descend into the abyss, while Autarch Mogg wielded a pair of long sabers.

“No wonder we couldn’t just blink inside.” Ning glanced at the walls of the abyss. Sphere-shaped spacetime bubbles dotted the walls, each of them ranging from ten thousand kilometers to over a hundred million kilometers in size. These spacetime bubbles simply hung there, connected to each other while channeling an enormous amount of power.

“Why are there so many spacetime bubbles here?” Autarch Mogg was puzzled. “Let me see what happens when I destroy one of them.”

“Be careful.” They had come here to destroy this thing. Ning naturally wouldn’t object to Mogg’s suggestion.

“Break!” Autarch Mogg let out a loud shout, sending out a mighty surge of energy that transformed into waves of folded dimensional attacks that could be seen with the naked eye. The attacks slammed against a distant spacetime bubble, causing the bubble to tremble for a few moments before bursting apart. However, nothing was held within it.

Rumble... nearby, a new spacetime bubble appeared out of nowhere. This one was exactly the same size as the previous one, roughly ten million kilometers in diameter.

“I broke one, so this thing made a new one.” Autarch Mogg frowned. “I can see at least a million of these bubbles. I can’t imagine how many the entire behemoth hive holds! I can sense how all these spacetime bubbles are linked to each other, channeling a powerful force which is used to furiously swallow everything within the outside world.”

“Let’s attack at full power and see if we can wreck them,” Ning said.

“Alright.” Mogg nodded.

Both of them were searching for clues for dealing with the hive. They could easily tell that the countless spacetime bubbles were important tools in allowing the hive to devour energy from the outside world.

The golden-robed Ning manifested three heads and six arms. Six Northmoon swords in hand, Ning began to furiously attack the surrounding spacetime bubbles with abandon via his Spacetime Sword Dao. Sword-light flashed everywhere, causing the various bubbles to be instantly destroyed on contact.

Ning also expanded his Sword Dao Domain to cover a large radius, reinforcing it with the power of his heartworld projection! Alas, the spacetime bubbles were so tough that Ning had to attack with his Spacetime Sword Dao if he wished to break them apart quickly.

Autarch Mogg manifested six arms as well. He used his Space Daobirth Essence with his six sabers, furiously destroying spacetime around him.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The two worked together to crush everything before them, almost instantly destroying over ten thousand spacetime bubbles. But... it was like they were swimming through a vast ocean, with each wave producing countless new bubbles.

They were able to destroy ten thousand spacetime bubbles in a flash, but the gloomy, dark walls of the abyss simply rippled slightly before manifesting ten thousand new bubbles. It would create as many as were destroyed!

“Halt,” Ning said.

“Why should we halt?” Autarch Mogg glanced at Ning, puzzled. “Even if we can’t destroy the spacetime bubbles faster than they are being created, at least we are forcing this thing to use up more energy. If we continue, we might be able to eventually run it dry.”

Ning shook his head. “It is useless. I can sense that the power of the destroyed bubbles is being completely absorbed by the hive, which then uses them to recreate new bubbles. The hive isn’t losing a single shred of energy during the destruction/creation process.”

“What?” Autarch Mogg was shocked. The cycle of destruction and rebirth didn’t cost any energy at all? “Then what should we do?”

“These spacetime bubbles are nothing more than a tool this hive uses,”

Ning said. "There are other things that matter far more, such as its energy generator! If we can destroy its energy generator, it'll be finished."

"But this thing is the size of a realmverse. How are we supposed to find it?" Mogg was worried. Realmverses were enormous in size. If they tried to search without any clues, even ten chaos cycles of time wouldn't be enough! It must be remembered that this thing was continuously devouring energy from the outside world, causing the Chaosverse to gradually weaken. They couldn't afford to waste any time.

Ning said, "Give me some time. I can find it."

Autarch Mogg blinked in surprise and delight. He fell silent, not wanting to disturb Ning.

Ning carefully scrutinized the countless spacetime bubbles around them. It must be remembered that Ning had infused the Dao of Formations into his Sword Dao, and so he was now highly attuned to how formations functioned and operated. These countless spacetime bubbles were clearly part of a single vast formation of incredible complexity! What he needed to do was find the critical points of this formation.

Ning wasn't strong enough to create or set down a formation of such magnitude, but by inspecting how it functioned he would still have a chance to find its critical points.

He continued inspecting for roughly the time needed to boil a kettle of tea. He then turned to Autarch Mogg and said, "Follow me." Ning reached out to cover Mogg and himself with his Spacetime Sword Dao, then began to advance at high speed.

"Have you already found the energy generator for the hive?" Mogg was surprised.

"I'm not sure, but I've definitely found one of its critical points," Ning said.

They continuously warped through spacetime, advancing at high speed. Suddenly... whoosh! An enormous, fiery-red tail tore through spacetime, instantly appearing right in front of Ning.

“Huh?” Ning’s face changed as he immediately brandished his Northmoon sword, delivering a crushing blow.

BOOM!!! An enormous explosion rang out.

Ning could sense a surge of tremendous power pass through his Northmoon sword and into his own body. He couldn’t help but stumble several steps backwards, and a look of shock appeared on his face. His Sword Dao was the most offensively lethal Dao there was. How was it that he could actually be knocked backwards in a frontal collision?!

“Grr... you finally come!” A deep voice rang out, followed by a towering form appearing and drawing near.

Ning and Mogg both stared at this new creature. It looked humanoid but was so towering as to seem like a mountain! Its entire body was covered with fiery scales, and it had a pair of sharp claws for hands, while its lower legs were reverse-jointed. It also had a long tail ! It had a triangular head and a pair of cold, murderous eyes. An aura of flames was blazing across its entire body.

“What a powerful creature!” Autarch Mogg immediately sent mentally, “Darknorth, this has to be an Autarch-class void dweller.”

“Autarch class?” Ning was secretly shocked. His own ‘Stonefire Pearl’ had been acquired from an Autarch-class lifeform the Autarchs had slain. These creatures were incredibly rare, and they were viewed as the kings of the Infinite Void outside the Chaosverses.

“I’ve been waiting you for a long, long time,” the towering monstrosity rumbled.

“Waiting for us for a long time?” Both Ning and Mogg were rather puzzled. But right at this moment...

Boom! Boom! Two more powerful auras warped through spacetime and appeared before them. Ning and Mogg turned slightly pale as they stared at the two similarly massive creatures which had arrived. The first was a furry humanoid who only had a single eye and who radiated a vile, evil aura, while the second was something that looked like a dragon turtle. The

dragon turtle was the largest creature of the three.

“You finally made it.” The tall, skinny cyclopean creature spoke in a shrill voice. “We’ve been waiting for ages.”

“There’s three of us but only two of them. How are we supposed to divide them up?” the dragon turtle complained in a booming voice.

Chapter 18: The First Clash

“I got here first! One of them is mine,” the towering creature with fiery scales said as it stared at Ji Ning and Mogg.

“You only got here a half-second before we did, and you’ve already attacked them. Clearly, however, these two cultivator leaders are completely unharmed. Why the hell should you get a second chance?” the cyclopean creature argued shrilly.

“Are you trying to start a fight, One Eye?” The flames surrounding the fiery-scaled creature suddenly rose higher. Clearly, it was quite offended by this.

“Do you think I’m afraid of you?” the cyclopean creature laughed.

“Heh, you two are already squabbling before the battle has even begun! So far, only two of the local cultivator leaders have arrived. Let’s just kill them first! I bet the cultivators will then send more, at which point we can get rid of a third one, right?” The dragon turtle roared, “Let’s attack and kill these two!”

The three Autarch-class lifeforms spoke in thunderous voices, not disguising their intentions in the slightest. Ning and Mogg exchanged a glance upon hearing all of this.

“It sounds as though they have to kill a total of three cultivators,” Ning sent.

“Autarch-class void dwellers aren’t easily managed. The Sithe probably reached some sort of a deal with them,” Autarch Mogg sent back. “They can be considered the true rulers of the vast Infinite Void which lies beyond our Chaosverse, and they undoubtedly had to slaughter a path through their fellows in order to reach their current heights. They hardly understand the Dao at all, but they have such incredibly powerful bodies that they are very difficult to deal with. Killing three of them will be very hard!”

“I understand.” Ning nodded. All void dwellers possessed bodies that

were far stronger than even the bodies of Chaos Primordials... and the Autarch-class ones were even more insanely powerful! What made them truly dangerous was that they had so little understanding of the Dao that the 'rejection' they suffered upon entering this Chaosverse was almost meaningless to them, as they could hardly use the Dao to begin with! They still remained terrifying forces to be reckoned with.

"We previously managed to kill two of these Autarch-class void dwellers, but that was when we surrounded and outnumbered them," Autarch Mogg sent mentally. "There are only two of us right now. This is going to be very difficult."

"Let's chat with them first and see if there is a way we can avoid fighting." Ning could also sense the threat which these three Autarch-class creatures posed.

"Gentlemen!" Ning chuckled. "Why must we fight to the death? This war is a war between us and the Sithe. Why don't the three of you just leave our Chaosverse and go back to your Infinite Void? Stay far away from the war. I imagine it is unlikely the Sithe would be able to capture you a second time. In fact, I'm surprised they captured you at all!"

"Hmph. We let our guards down," the cyclopean creature said coldly.

"If we escaped, the Sithe can forget about capturing us again." The fiery-scaled creature gritted its teeth, then howled furiously, "But what's the point of saying all this? Do you really think you have a way to let us leave?"

The dragon turtle stared intently at Ning as well.

It was true that the three held no grudges against the local cultivators at all. If they could return home safely, they would be more than willing to do so. They might've been captured by the Sithe and forced to accept some tasks, but they weren't bound by lifeblood oaths! Or, to be precise, there was no way for them to swear lifeblood oaths at all. They were completely different from both the cultivators and the Sithe!

For both the cultivators and the Sithe, both the Dao and the Dao-heart were extremely important. All of them trained from young as cultivators,

slowly rising in power thanks to the Dao. These void dwellers, however, were evil, chaotic, and berserk creatures by nature. They didn't even have Dao-hearts per se; the only law they understood was the law of survival. They would fight to the death, and the strong would live while the weak would die! They followed only the most brutish and barbaric of 'laws', the law of strength.

It was much like how weak mortals were completely incapable of swearing 'lifeblood oaths' without the help of something like an oathstone. They could swear until they were blue in the face, but they would never have to face the fear of their truesouls being destroyed. The same was true for these void dwellers! It was impossible for them to swear lifeblood oaths.

Thus, the Sithe generally had two options when dealing with the void dwellers they captured. They could either torture them into insanity, or they could slowly manage to tame them! However, it was virtually impossible to tame an Autarch-class void dweller, and so the only real choice was to either torture them or to negotiate with them as equals and come to an agreement.

"Why don't the three of you just leave this hive?" Ning probed. "After that, you can just leave our Chaosverse. I don't think anyone would or could stop you."

"Leave the hive?" The cyclopean creature let out a cold laugh. "This is a place which can only be entered, not exited! The only way to leave is for the Sithe to voluntarily let you leave. If you don't believe me, try for yourselves! Let's see if the two of you can leave or not."

"There's no way out?" Ning was startled. Neither he nor Mogg had encountered any impediments at all as they flew into the deep abyss.

"Coming in is easy, but leaving is impossible," the cyclopean creature said. "The three of us have tried to leave countless times, but there is no way out!"

Ning had the feeling that the creature wasn't lying. There wasn't a need to lie over something like this.

“Well, that’s easily solved,” Ning said. “Once we destroy this thing from the inside, we’ll be able to leave.”

“Destroy it? You two?” the titanic fiery-scaled creature boomed mockingly.

“You should at least let us give it a try. Maybe we’d succeed,” Ning said. “Just stand there and watch! You can always attack us later, if we really aren’t able to destroy it.”

Ning’s goal was simple. He wanted for these three Autarch-class void dwellers to not cause him any trouble as he tested out methods for destroying this behemoth hive. It must be remembered that these creatures had tremendous brutish force, but they couldn’t compare to the cultivators when it came to understanding the Dao. There was no way they could unlock the mysteries behind such an intricately designed weapon, but that didn’t mean Ning and Mogg couldn’t do so either.

“Impossible.”

“No way.” The other two Autarch-class void dwellers instantly rejected Ning’s suggestion.

“Cultivator leaders, let me speak plainly with you,” the dragon turtle said coldly. “Long ago, we came to an agreement with the Sithe after our capture. We made them certain promises. The first promise was that we had to each kill at least one of the ‘leaders of the cultivators’, while the second was that we had to protect this place for a full chaos cycle. Once we complete both objectives, we’ll be released and granted freedom.”

“We have to protect this place for a chaos cycle, so there’s no way we’ll let you try and destroy it. If we stand back, we’ll have instantly voided the agreement and the Sithe would never let us leave,” the cyclopean creature said.

“A full chaos cycle?” Ning and Mogg both grew anxious. That was unacceptable. Given how fast this thing was devouring energy, the Chaosverse probably would’ve been reduced to a husk of itself by then! The Sithe would’ve long ago taken control over the Chaosverse after a chaos cycle.

“There are two paths available to us,” the dragon turtle continued. “The first is for us to stand by the side of the Sithe. The second is for us to stand by your side... but if we do so, we’ll have made an irreversible choice! The three of us know just how terrifying this hive is, and we have no reason to believe that you two will be able to deal with it. We can’t just entrust our very lives to the two of you, unless you can somehow prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that you can destroy this hive.”

Ning and Mogg were both speechless. Prove beyond the shadow of a doubt? They didn’t even know how the thing operated yet. How were they supposed to do that?

“Hmph.” The dragon turtle snorted. “And here I thought you cultivators had something really impressive up your sleeves.”

“You disappoint us. KILL THEM!” The cyclopean creature was the first to attack. Whoosh! Its body blurred as it transformed into a strange ripple that instantly appeared before Ning and Mogg. It was so fast that even Ning was rendered speechless! Even when Ning used the Storm Sword Dao, he was still considerably slower than this creature.

“Leave this one to me!” Autarch Mogg held a long saber in each of his six arms, and he similarly transformed into a spatial ripple to fight back. As the master of the Space Daobirth Essence, Autarch Mogg was more or less able to stave off this cyclopean creature.

Slash! Dimensional tears began to appear and disappear in the space around the two. The cyclopean void dweller’s attacks were completely suppressing Autarch Mogg in both speed and ferocity, but the Autarch’s incredibly high level of insight ensured that his six long sabers formed a completely airtight defense. He would probably be able to hold on for quite some time.

“These Autarch-class void dwellers all became kings of their kind through constant slaughter. None of them are easy to deal with.” Ning knew all along that killing these things in sole combat would be extremely difficult; in the past, the Autarchs had only accomplished it through strength in numbers. Still... Ning was confident in his abilities. Six million

chaos cycles of training had been completely transformative for him.

“Leave this one to me, you old bastard?” the fiery-scaled void dweller said.

“Fine.” The dragon turtle was very patient and elected to silently watch from afar.

“Hey, One-Eye! Let’s see who kills our opponent first!” The fiery-scaled creature let out a roaring laugh, filled with such power that when it blasted into Ning’s ears, Ning felt as though it was trying to tear his head apart. Next, the vast creature exploded into motion, transforming into a streak of fiery light that rammed straight towards Ning.

“I haven’t had a chance to really have a good fight since mastering the Eternal Omega Sword Dao and spending six million chaos cycles in training.” Ning could feel his blood pumping with excitement. It had been a long time since he got into a really good battle. Previously, it was because his truesoul was collapsing and he didn’t dare to fight with abandon. These days, it was because it was almost impossible for him to find a good opponent.

“I wonder how long it’ll take me to beat him? Will ten seconds be enough, or shall I need as much time as is needed to boil a kettle of tea?” Ning manifested three heads and six arms, his six Northmoon swords at the ready.

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RWX's Thoughts

Taking bets! My bet is on ten seconds. No sneak peeking ;)

Chapter 19: Captured

Ji Ning's body blurred, transforming to become 540,000 meters tall. However, compared to the titanic fiery-scaled void dweller, he was still a bit smaller.

"Die!" The creature lashed out at Ning with its terrifyingly sharp claws, which its physical prowess ensured were deadlier than even Universe treasures.

Bang! Ning was instantly torn apart into countless pieces.

"Eh?" The fiery-scaled void dweller was shocked. "An illusion!" Everything it could see was nothing more than part of the illusions created by Ning's Sword Dao!

"Storm Execution!" Six streaks of sword-light howled forth, slashing against the blazing flames covering the scaled creature's neck. It stumbled backwards, but nothing more than a few white marks were left behind on the scales protecting the neck. However, right as Ning's swords connected with the creature's neck, Ning used the Dao of Karma to pour the power of the strike throughout the creature's body, causing internal destruction with abandon.

"What a powerful cultivator!" The scaled creature lifted its head up, letting out a bellow: "But your illusions are useless against me!"

BOOM! The flames covering its body expanded dramatically, its internal flames pouring out from within to cover an area of a million kilometers. The power of these flames was so great that it actually managed to push back Ning's Sword Dao Domain and his heartworld projection.

"My six strikes weren't even able to break its scales! I was able to injure its vital essence through karma, but as an Autarch-class void dweller it has an absolutely prodigious amount of essence." Ning immediately began to consider what to do next. The flames the void dweller had released were pushing back against the Sword Dao Domain. Once it overtook Ning's illusions, Ning would be forced to reveal his true location and he would no longer be able to catch the creature offguard.

Kill it through the Karma Sword Dao? That was too time-consuming! The Autarch-class stone lifeform the Autarchs had encountered and slain all those years ago had been indestructibly hard, as it truly was a stone by nature. Not even the Autarchs were able to injure it, and so their only option had been to exhaust it to death after tens of thousands of years!

However, Ning felt certain that this scaled creature wouldn't be quite as tough to deal with as that stone lifeform had been. There had to be a flaw Ning could exploit.

"Its body is unspeakably powerful, which is why it has Autarch-class power. It has far more vital essence than actual Autarch's; to kill it using the Karma Sword Dao is going to be too slow. I'll have to come up with another idea for breaking through its defenses... but I hit it six times in a row and merely left behind a few white marks on its scales."

Ning pondered for a moment, then came to a conclusion.

"Die, cultivator! Die!" The towering scaled creature charged at Ning with incomparable ferocity, its tail smashing apart anything which got in its way.

Now that Ning had some experience from their first clash, he immediately changed tactics. Whoosh! Ning dodged in a ghostly manner, transforming into the storm itself as he charged towards the scaled void dweller.

"He's fast!" The scaled creature was shocked. "Only One-Eye is his superior in speed."

The wind and the lightning thundered in harmony, with the scaled creature's claws and tail completely unable to stop Ning's attack.

"Kill!" Ning simultaneously chopped out with all six swords at the same time, his swords spinning out like the spokes of a wheel! The edges of each sword was covered in blurry light. A closer look would've shown that the blurry sword-light was actually composed of countless interspersed white and black specks of light that were connected to each other. The specks of light were spinning in blaze, with the white light blazing like fire while the black light hissed with dark corrosive power.

The Dark Sword Dao – it infused corrosive darkness into the Dao of the Sword

The Light Sword Dao – it infused blazing light into the Dao of the Sword.

When joined together, they came to form the Cycle Sword Dao which Ning had developed. Working in harmony, the two were able to support and reinforce each other with tremendous synergy, allowing for blazing strikes of corrosive power that ate through anything in its path! It was like the merciless cycle of life and death itself, chopping through all things in its path.

Whoosh! Six streaks of gray sword-light shot out at the same time, spinning at the scaled creature like the blades of a giant windmill.

Boom! Boom! Boom! The corrosive power of the Cycle Sword Dao was utterly unstoppable. Even the fiery-red scales of the void dweller began to crack. Moments later they broke apart entirely, with a gaping wound appearing below them. Gold blood seeped out, followed by the flesh quickly healing.

“You actually injured me!” The scaled creature went completely berserk. A layer of red light appeared over its entire body, and its power increased dramatically. It began to launch a furious counter-attack while howling, “Hurry up and help me out, you old bastard!” Its scales were its pride and joy. The fact that they had been shattered caused it to feel that it was in danger.

“Coming.” The dragon turtle immediately came flying over.

“Illusion Sword Dao!”

The scaled creature’s flames were only able to cover an area of a million kilometers; beyond that, Ning’s illusions continued to reign supreme. Countless Nings appeared within that area, and all of them began to assault the scaled creature from afar at the same time. The dragon turtle had no idea which one was the real one.

Whoosh! Whoosh! The light of the Cycle Sword Dao continued to spin out like the spokes of a wheel, its strikes screaming through the air from a

million kilometers away. A million kilometers might seem to be a very great distance, but it was actually extremely short for someone of Ning's abilities. All it did was give the scaled void dweller a chance to react to Ning's attacks, but there was no way the dragon turtle would be able to actually help it.

Ning was completely dominant on a technical level. His Cycle Sword Dao once more tore open a giant gaping wound in the scaled creature's body.

"Aaaaaaaah! Die, die!" The scaled creature launched wild counter-attacks with abandon, but Ning was far too nimble. Each time after he attacked he retreated back into his illusions, making it impossible for them to locate where he truly was.

"Old bastard! Old bastard!" the scaled creature called out furiously.

"I can't locate the real one! Each time he moves into extremely close range as he attacks, then retreats right away. I don't have enough time!" the dragon turtle responded anxiously as well.

"During the last war we fought against the Sithe, two Autarch-class void dwellers were on their side. The end result was that both of them died, while all of us were untouched." Ning's voice rang out in the air as he continuously launched more attacks, his terrifying Cycle Sword Dao repeatedly ripping huge wounds into the scaled creature's body.

The scales were so extremely durable that Autarch-class attacks were generally unable to breach them, but Ning's Cycle Sword Dao was a perfect counter and so Ning was able to breach through them. Given how tough the scales were, they were equally difficult and time-consuming to repair once destroyed.

"All you creatures can do is rely on the natural power of your bodies."

Slash! Another wave of attacks from the Cycle Sword Dao chopped past the scaled creature.

"Even if we cannot beat you, staying alive is simplicity itself... and once we find your weaknesses, you are dead."

Slash! Slash! The light of the Cycle Sword Dao left more and more gaping wounds on the scaled creature's body.

"The Sithe put you here, yes... but did you really think they intending on letting you survive? They simply wanted you to slow us down at the cost of your own lives."

Riiiiip! The scaled creature's long tail was actually severed midway through!

"Ahhhhhhhhh!" The scaled void dweller's titanic body was now covered with wounds. Its tail had actually been chopped off, and even its arms were half-severed. Its lacerated flesh was quickly healing, but its scales wouldn't be able to recover within a short period of time. It grew increasingly frantic, as it could sense how death was impending.

"One-Eye!" the scaled creature roared loudly.

The skinny cyclopean creature was battling Autarch Mogg nearby and had been keeping an eye on the situation. It called out anxiously in its shrill voice, "I can't find his true body, and he's too fast! Your flames aren't able to cover enough area to force him to reveal himself."

"I can't expand my domain any further!" the scaled creature said frantically. It had created this flaming domain from its own power, and it wasn't easy for him to strengthen those flames to a level where it could simultaneously suppress both Ning's Sword Dao Domain as well as Ning's heartworld projection! It could only maintain enough power to do both up to a distance of a million kilometers; this was the creature's maximum limit! Alas, a million kilometers was a short enough distance that neither of the other two Autarch-class void dwellers would be able to interrupt Ning's incredibly fast attacks.

"Damn."

"Stop that!" Both the Autarch-class creatures were turning frantic.

Slash! One of the scaled creature's arms was completely severed off.

"I surrender! I surrender! Spare me!" The scaled creature finally began to panic as those terrifying streaks of sword-light tore through its scales once

more. “Spare me and I’ll obey you in all things!”

“Obey me? I wouldn’t dare to place any faith in you.”

There was no way for these Autarch-class void dwellers to swear lifeblood oaths. The only agreements they could make were oral agreements, and they could go back on those agreements whenever they pleased!

“No...!”

Ning’s sword-light continued to chop down mercilessly. Ning only sped up the pace after most of the creature’s scales had been destroyed, and his sword-light flew about with abandon as he completely chopped the scaled creature apart into countless pieces. A red gemstone suddenly appeared, and it was able to survive even Ning’s furious blows of sword-light. The faint outline of the scaled creature could be seen within the red gemstone, and it was still begging Ning: “Don’t kill me!”

Ning had unleashed a total of 3,220 strikes in destroying this Autarch-class void dweller’s body. He immediately grabbed the red gemstone, then cast a seal across it.

“I’ve already captured this one, and I can destroy it with a thought.” Ning turned to glance at the other two Autarch-class void dwellers, his voice echoing within the area: “Are the two of you willing to stand with us now? Or are you still going to stand with the Sithe?”

Chapter 20: Formation

The dragon turtle and the cyclopean creature shared a glance. The two Autarch-class void dwellers were unable to hide their shock. One of their peers had been defeated in just a few short moments, its body destroyed and its life-core taken?

“If you keep fighting against us, the only result will be that you both die,” Autarch Mogg said. “Stand with us. Once we deal with this behemoth hive, you’ll gain your freedom.”

“Do you really think you can threaten us just because you captured one of us?” the dragon turtle snorted coldly.

The cyclopean creature smiled coldly as it glanced at Ning and Autarch Mogg. “We’re not like that idiot. I’m fast enough that you two won’t even be able to touch me... and as for that tough old bastard over there? It is even stronger than me! You have no chance of defeating it.”

Mogg frowned. The cyclopean creature was telling the truth; neither Mogg nor Ning was a match for the creature in speed.

“If that’s the case, go ahead and die.” Ning didn’t want to waste any time. This behemoth hive was continuously devouring the power of this Chaosverse with each passing moment! Ning transformed into the storm once more as he charged towards the dragon turtle.

It must be remembered that Ning was extremely well-rounded and was skilled in almost every Dao. Thus, he was capable of seizing upon his opponent’s weaknesses and come up with a perfect counter each time! Ning felt quite certain that he would be able to deal with the seemingly-speedy Cyclops, and so he wanted to try out the dragon turtle and see how strong it was.

“Hmph.” The dragon turtle didn’t move at all. The grayish-white skin covering its neck looked as tough as a rock, and it just watched coldly as Ning approached it. Invisible waves of energy began to manifest in the area around the dragon turtle, pushing back against the Sword Dao Domain and the heartforce projection alike.

“Kill!” An absolutely dazzling streak of light shot out like a flaming meteor that was crashing to earth. This was Ning’s terrifying sword-light, and it was chopping straight at the dragon turtle.

Hiss... the dragon turtle’s draconian head reared up, hissing like a viper and moving with serpentine speed as it chomped upwards, with space being continuously destroyed and recreated within its maw.

Boom! The sharp sword-light came crashing down against the ears of that draconian head.

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Ning and the dragon turtle began a furious battle against each other, with Ning putting the terrifying might of his Sword Dao on full display. He alternated between using overwhelming power to shut down the dragon turtle’s savagery and using unpredictable sword-arts to launch deadly stabs! He launched a thousand ferocious attacks in succession that came crashing down like waves, used the deadly corrosive power of his Cycle Sword Dao, and even use all of the various elemental Daos of his Five Elements Sword Dao.

Ning had completely suppressed the dragon turtle and was raining down blows upon it!

“He’s that powerful?!” the distant cyclopean creature was rather shocked.

“Darknorth really has become the strongest of us seven,” Autarch Mogg mused silently. “I’m only superior to him in the Dao of Space; in all else, he is better. He’s simply skilled into many different Daos!”

“Gwaaaaar!” The dragon turtle was enraged by the beating it was taking. It furiously tried to fight back, but it continued to be completely dominated.

In terms of actual power, the dragon turtle was the strongest of the three Autarch-class void dwellers. Its deceptively simple bites were actually strengthened by an incredible innate ability that made those bites more powerful than even Ning’s most powerful strikes! It was all-enveloping

and compressed space itself, making it impossible for most enemies to dodge this attack. Alas, Ning was at such a high level of insight that he was able to dissolve the attack with ease.

Ning, however, was feeling quite frustrated as well. “Its body is completely flawless and impregnable.” He had used everything he had and was beating the hell out of this dragon turtle, but he wasn’t able to do any damage! He had even used his sword-light to stab against the dragon turtle’s eyes, but he was unable to pierce through the grayish-white eyelids. As for the rest of the body? None of Ning’s attacks were able to injure it at all.

“Mogg,” Ning sent mentally to Mogg, “Its body is completely flawless and unbreakable. What should we do?” Mogg had been alive for much longer than him, and was much more experienced.

“When we fought the stone lifeform all those years ago, we similarly found it to be indestructible. There’s really no real option aside from slowly exhausting it to death,” Mogg sent mentally. “Use karmic attacks to destroy its vital essence, and just keep on at it until it dies! Last time, we bombarded that stone lifeform for tens of thousands of years before managing to kill it. This dragon turtle seems to have a similarly powerful body, and I’ll wager it has just as much vital essence. Your karmic attacks, however, are inferior to those of Titanos. It’ll probably take you at least a million years to exhaust it, or perhaps even longer!”

Ning instantly felt helpless. This was the clumsiest method available, and apparently the only method available! Karmic attacks ignored all defenses, as they used the power of karma to attack someone at the very core of their essence! Alas, Ning was still significantly weaker than Titanos in this respect.

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“I can’t kill you, but you can’t hurt me either!” The dragon turtle finally abandoned its attempts to counter-attack and instead just allowed Ning to uselessly rain down blows against it.

“How can any physical body be THIS tough?” Ning was secretly

speechless. He was so powerful that his attacks would easily cause even Universe treasures or Chaos Primordials to crumble, but this Autarch-class dragon turtle was so tough that Ning wasn't able to do anything to it at all.

"Let's finish off the other one first, Mogg," Ning sent.

"Alright," Mogg agreed.

Swoosh! Ning instantly transformed back into a storm of wind and lightning as he shot towards the skinny cyclopean creature, which had been watching him from afar this entire time. Thanks to Ning's illusions, the cyclopean creature had no idea that Ning was even moving towards it.

Even so, the cyclopean creature's attunement to space and wind allowed it to realize that something strange was going on. "Eh?" Swish! It suddenly dodged, and as it did so a streak of sword-light stabbed straight through its after-image! The creature reappeared over a hundred million kilometers away. It narrowed its eyes and said in its shrill voice, "You want to sneak-attack me? You won't even touch me!"

"As far as I'm concerned, you are the weakest of the three." Ning stared at the cyclopean creature, then unleashed an awesome wave of mana which he connected to the boundless power of the Dao. The mana manifested in the form of countless swords that filled the illusory region. Countless millions of streaks of sword-light appeared, with each streak of sword-light filled with such power that they could easily slay Otherverse Lords.

When Ning had been a mere Daolord, his Sword Dao Domain was created solely through the power of the Dao itself. Now, however, Ning was using the power of his mana to actively control the Dao, allowing his domain to become even more powerful! The attacks might not be as mighty as physical strikes unleashed with the Northmoon swords, but they were still tens of times more powerful than in the past.

"This sword-light is very weak." The cyclopean creature glanced disdainfully at the countless streams of sword-light, then let out a shrill chuckle: "You won't even be able to scratch me with these things."

Although it was physically the weakest of the three Autarch-class void dwellers, it was still far tougher than any Chaos Primordial.

“Formation, assemble!” Ning called out coldly.

Boom! Countless streams of sword-light began to flow together rhythmatically within the domain, and moments later the entire scene changed.

“What’s going on?!” The cyclopean creature stared in shock at its surroundings, which had become transformed into a fragrant world of grass and flowers. It was standing in the middle of a prairie, and the dragon turtle was nowhere to be seen.

“B-but...” The dragon turtle stared at its own surroundings as well. The world around it had been transformed into a vast sea. The waves of the sea splashed around it, kicking up a few foamy bubbles. It was also unable to see any other creatures around it.

“A formation!” The dragon turtle grew anxious. It instantly flew forwards at high speed, sending its massive bulk hurtling through the air while it furiously tore at the area around it with its four stubby legs. Alas, the waves of the sea seemed to be completely illusory; no matter how it attacked the waves, it remained unable to see anything beyond them.

“You void dwellers do not understand the Dao. You are foolish! You can overpower weaker creatures, but if you encounter a formation set down by someone of equal power to you then you are completely helpless.” Ning’s voice echoed throughout the illusory realms the two creatures were in. “You will not be able to escape my illusions. I can do with you as I please.”

Ning had long ago reached Hegemony in the Dao of Formations. He had then infused it into his Dao of the Sword, creating the Sword Formation Dao. Now, he was using the power of his mana and his insights into the Dao to transform his countless streams of sword-light into formation-bases, which he then used to construct an enormous formation! Even people like Autarch Titanos or Autarch Mogg, who also had a high level of insight into the Dao, would need to spend some time to solve this type of formation. These Autarch-class void dwellers, however, were completely

incapable of doing so.

Their advantages were obvious, but their weaknesses were obvious as well.

“Break! BREAK!” The cyclopean creature was growing desperate. It was now holding a long shuttle in its claws, and it was furiously attacking the world around it. Alas, the world remained a fragrant world of grass and flowers.

Riiiiip! A streak of sword-light suddenly appeared right behind the cyclopean creature. It had appeared without any warning, and it instantly tore through the creature’s fur and stabbed into its body. Then... the sword-light began to spin! Slash! An enormous gaping wound instantly appeared, followed by golden blood fountaining outwards. The cyclopean creature frantically pulled back and tried to defend against any new attacks.

“Do you think your speed will be of any use to you within my formations? I can approach you without a sound. A few more attacks and you’ll be as good as dead.” Ning’s voice echoed out within the plains once more: “The other two had tougher bodies to deal with, but you’ll be easy to handle.”

“What should I do? Old bastard? Old bastard!!!” the cyclopean creature screamed frantically.

“Keep screaming. Scream as loud as you want. It won’t hear you.” Ning’s voice rang out once more. The beautiful world of flowers was like a nightmare which had completely enveloped the void dweller.

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RWX's Thoughts

Did the last sentence read like something out of a horror story for anyone else?

Chapter 21: Exalt Anitya

“No! This is just a formation. I can break it. I can break it!” The cyclopean creature could sense its doom impending, and the sensation was driving it mad. It brandished the shuttle, furiously striking at all directions with it. Slash! Slash! Space was churned apart into tiny little pieces by his blows, but the overall environment remained that of a fragrant world of grass and flowers. Ji Ning’s formation wouldn’t be so easily defeated!

“Break! Break!!!” the cyclopean creature yelled hoarsely.

In the past, it had never viewed formations as something to be afraid of. This was because it had long ago grown accustomed to bursting through formations with its overwhelming power. Formations which could successfully trap Autarch-class void dwellers were incredibly rare to begin with! This one in particular was ensuring that it was not able to put its speed to good effect at all.

“Poor bastard. He ended up running into you, Darknorth.” Autarch Mogg shook his head as he watched from afar, then sent mentally to Ning, “You can be described as the number one formations expert in all the cultivator civilizations.”

“That’s only because I infused the Dao of Formations into my Sword Dao,” Ning said with a smile. “Just a moment, please. I’m about to capture the creature.”

Swish! A streak of gloomy sword-light appeared in ghostly fashion, instantly piercing through the cyclopean creature’s skinny body. One of the creature’s legs went flying, with blood spewing everywhere. The cyclopean creature frantically retreated, not paying any attention to the heavy wound which was quickly beginning to heal. The severed leg was regrowing as well.

“You won’t be able to last. You Autarch-class creatures have very powerful bodies, but that also makes it extremely hard for you to truly heal.”

Sword-light flashed again. Ning's attacks were coming from every single direction. This looked like an extremely beautiful prairie, but it was a death trap which could unleash sword-light from any and every part of it! There was no way to dodge, and each time the cyclopean creature would only detect the sword-light once the light was right in front of it. The creature's tremendous speed was rendered useless here.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Just three seconds later, a total of over sixty attacks had appeared and then vanished without a trace. Finally, the cyclopean creature's entire body crumbled apart. Its healing speed simply wasn't able to keep up with the rate at which Ning was causing damage, and it was now completely incapable of fighting back at all.

Boom! The creature's body imploded. Ning reached out with his sword-light to tug free a white and glossy pearl from the 'corpse', and it quickly flew over to Ning. The pearl held an image of the furry cyclopean creature within it, and it was begging Ning for its life: "Please spare me! Spare me! None of this was of my own free will!"

Ning waved his hand, grabbing the pearl and casting a seal over it.

So long as his seal prevented the pearl from absorbing energy from the outside world, the creature would be unable to revive! It could only reconstitute its body if given access to enough energy, but even without its body it would remain alive so long as its truesoul within its life-core remained unharmed. Only when the life-cores were destroyed would these Autarch-class void dwellers be truly 'dead'! However, Ning didn't feel much of an urge to actually kill them. He was going to simply imprison them for now.

And so... two of the three void dwellers had been captured by Ning.

"Congratulations, Darknorth." Mogg flew over, his scaled face split by an amazed smile. "Thank goodness you came with me. Otherwise, we wouldn't have been able to deal with them so easily."

"Autarch-class void dwellers are indeed very tough to deal with, due to their innate gifts. However, their obvious weakness is that they do not train in the Dao. They have a very low level of insight," Ning said. "I'm

only able to attack their weaknesses and defeat them with such ease because I'm fairly well-rounded."

"Any void dwellers capable of reaching the Autarch level of power have very few weaknesses." Autarch Mogg sighed. "These three were all very powerful, with that cyclopean creature possessing unparalleled speed. The only way to handle it is to do what you just did – trap it in a formation, an extremely profound formation which it cannot break through with raw power. However, such formations generally require detailed and intricate preparations as well as for formation-bases to be laid down in advance. Given how crafty the creature is, it would never just watch us set down those formations and then just step into them. Only you could've done what you did, Darknorth. You created a formation with but a thought, making it impossible for it to escape."

"That scaled void dweller was even more difficult to deal with. It had virtually no weaknesses at all! Thankfully, your sword-arts were able to breach its armor of scales. I'm truly impressed that you were able to capture both of them! As for this last one... it seems to be completely invulnerable," Autarch Mogg said.

Ning sighed. "I really don't have any idea what I'm supposed to do with this last one."

He was very well-rounded, true, but Autarch-class void dwellers were simply too difficult to handle. The cyclopean creature had an obvious weakness, which was why Ning was confident in his ability to deal with it! Ning hadn't been sure if he could handle the other two, and so he had to probe them in battle first. He had discovered that his Cycle Sword Dao was capable of breaking the scaled creature's armor, but there was nothing Ning could do which affected the dragon turtle.

Ning and Mogg both moved to the place where the dragon turtle was located, then stared at it. The dragon turtle simply sat there, silently inspecting its surroundings. It was trapped within an illusory formation, but it showed no signs of fear whatsoever.

"So what should we do?" Ning pondered.

“If we can’t kill it in a short period of time, we should just leave it there for now,” Autarch Mogg said. “Let’s go locate the core mechanisms controlling this behemoth hive first. We need to destroy this hive as soon as possible. If it comes to bother us again, use your formations to trap it. If need be, I’ll personally tie it down.”

“That’s all we can do.” Ning nodded. “Let’s go.”

“Let’s go.”

Ning quickly led Mogg in advancing to the critical point he had discovered earlier while analyzing the functionings of this behemoth hive. As they left, the illusory formation Ning had established quickly dissipated. There was no way to maintain it from afar! This was a formation which Ning had to use all his power to cast and maintain, a powerful Autarch-class formation which used up an enormous amount of energy. Ning had used his mana to guide the limitless power of the Sword Dao in setting up this formation. Now that Ning was gone, it would be very difficult to use mere formation-base type treasures to supply the necessary amount of energy.

It must be remembered that not even Sithe Apocalypse-class formations were as mighty as this one! Thus, it would take Ning an extremely long period of time and many precious materials to create a physical variant, far longer than Ning would need to simply use his Karma Sword Dao to attrition the dragon turtle to death.

“Two of my old friends are gone, just like that.” The dragon turtle sighed to itself. “These Autarchs who train in their ‘Dao’ really are hard to deal with. Ugh. It is our own fault for being caught by the Sithe. We really were given no choices at all. Who the hell would want to fight against these cultivators anyhow?”

“...eh?” The dragon turtle stared at its surroundings in surprise. The illusory realm around it had vanished, revealing ordinary spacetime

“They left?” The dragon turtle grew anxious. “They’re still heading for the core regions. I have to stop them!”

Swoosh! The dragon turtle immediately warped through spacetime in

pursuit.

.....

This 'behemoth hive' was in reality an intricately designed super weapon, and it was filled with many separate spacetime continuums. One of them was merely three hundred meters in size, and it held a man who was seated in the lotus position, his long unbound hair. This man's hair was black on one side and white on the other. He looked quite strange and mysterious.

His eyes looked like a series of concentric circles, and his gaze was as deep as a bottomless abyss. He quietly stared at the images displayed in front of him. The images shown were of Ning and Autarch Mogg battling against those three Autarch-class void dwellers. However, the images were blurry and indistinct. He was able to scry some of what had happened due to the residue left behind by the various attacks, but wasn't able to truly 'watch' the battle.

"There's no way for me to truly scry any of these cultivator Autarchs," the black-white haired man murmured softly. "However... judging from their auras, they should've only sent two people."

Autarchs were incredibly powerful. In their own Chaosverse, they were able to summon nigh-limitless amounts of power, and it was almost impossible to view them if they didn't want to be viewed. The Sithe would only sense energies blocking their scans; they wouldn't actually be able to see the Autarchs at all.

"Eh?" The black-white haired man's face suddenly turned pale. The battle had just come to an end and both Ning and Mogg had vanished, leaving behind just the dragon turtle.

"Only one of those three void dwellers are left?" The black-white haired man was stunned. Ignoring everything else, he immediately activated the formation-base he was seated on.

Rumble... the formation-base slowly began to swivel in place, and a ripple of power began to manifest and take form as a pillar of light. Slowly, the pillar of light resolved into a humanoid figure. It was a balding,

barefoot, loose-robed man of great stature and size who had a kind, sympathetic smile on his face. His eyes were absolutely mesmerizing, and those who saw him would feel the unconscious desire to submit to him.

“Almighty Iyerre,” the black-white haired man bowed respectfully.

“How are things, Anitya?” Iyerre asked.

“The cultivators have entered our super weapon, the ‘Annihilation Hive’, but there are only two of them. Their auras are vast, preventing me from seeing them clearly. However, two of the three Autarch-class void dwellers we imprisoned within the Annihilation Hive have already died. Only the defensively impregnable ‘Howler’ beast we captured remains alive,” the black-white haired man said respectfully.

Iyerre frowned slightly. “Only two of them came?” The loss of two void dwellers was a minor matter, but he was very disappointed that only two of the cultivators had entered the Annihilation Hive. If five or six had come in, the Sithe could’ve seized this opportunity to immediately launch the final war!

Chapter 22: The Central Nexus

“Just follow the plan,” Iyerre instructed. “If those two void dwellers died, they died. As long as the Howler beast is still alive, our plans remain unaffected.”

“Understood,” the black-white haired man said obediently.

“Feel free to contact me if anything major happens.” Iyerre’s lips crooked upwards in a smile. “I’ve spent countless aeons and paid an enormous price in order to create the Annihilation Hive. It won’t be easy for them to defeat it... and if they just send in two Autarchs, their chances are absolutely nil. If they send in more Autarchs they might be able to eventually figure out a way to destroy it... but in doing so, they’ll have lost the battle to us before it even began.”

The creation of the Annihilation Hive was Iyerre’s greatest accomplishment. He was extremely confident in its prowess.

.....

This place was filled with countless spacetime bubbles of varying size, and they could be seen everywhere.

Ji Ning continued to examine the inner workings of the entire hive as he advanced, moving closer and closer to the critical point. After roughly an hour, they finally reached the spot.

“The central nexus point for the entire behemoth hive is located right up ahead.” Ning let out a sigh of relief. Ning had been focusing his full attention on inspecting the path before him, which had been rather tiring.

“The central nexus?” Autarch Mogg stared from afar as well.

Both of them carefully inspected the distant, empty region in front of them. At the very center of this empty region was a beautiful vortex of astral clouds. The astral clouds swirled in a vortex-like manner around the very center.

These astral clouds were composed of countless specks of light and seemed almost illusory in nature. Ning and Autarch Mogg had such

incredible visual acuity that they were able to see through almost anything, so long as there wasn't a complete seal that blocked out all sight. The two were able to gaze past the astral clouds and thus see the black tower at the very center. The tower had to be ten thousand kilometers tall!

The vast black tower was covered with swirls of strange power which caused the vortex of astral clouds to appear around it. More than that – it also caused countless ripples of spacetime to rise and fall in the area around it, and it resonated with the entire realmverse-sized hive! It was the source of that terrifying swallowing power which was draining away all forms of energy from the outside world. Not even the prime essences of the Chaosverse were able to recover the energy lost.

It was easy for Autarchs to enter this place, but if they tried to leave they would also suffer from that powerful devouring force. There was no way they could possibly escape!

“This has to be the most central nexus point of the entire behemoth hive.” Ning’s gaze was able to see through the vortex of astral clouds and into the black tower within it.

This tower was shaped like a pyramid, and it was completely pitch-black in color.

“You moved quite fast, cultivator leaders.” A deep, rumbling voice suddenly rang out.

Ning and Mogg turned to stare off into the distance. Within the astral vortex, there was an enormous entity which was lying in wait. It was the dragon turtle! Ning had to slowly find the path to this location, while the dragon turtle already knew the routes and so took the fastest path here. It had arrived long ago.

“In accordance with the agreement I made with the Sithe, I will not allow you to damage this place,” the dragon turtle rumbled. “However... I’ll wager that you aren’t even strong enough to get here.”

“Oh?” Ning and Mogg exchanged a glance. “Attack!” They didn’t hesitate at all. Ning manifested three heads and six arms, while Mogg manifested

six arms. Both charged straight towards the dazzlingly beautiful vortex of astral clouds without hesitation.

Boom! The vortex of astral clouds continued to spin in place, causing countless streams of light around it to twist and bend as it crushed all in its path.

“What a powerful obstructive force.” Ning and Mogg were respectively covered by layers of sword-light and dimensional membranes as they continued to fight through the clouds.

Bang! Bang! Bang! They smashed through one layer of astral clouds after another. Ning was able to see that there appeared to be a total of 106 layers of these astral clouds, all assembled in that vortex formation.

“The power here is tremendous. Even Chaos Primordials would be crushed into tiny bits if they came here.” Ning and Mogg began to decelerate as they moved to defend themselves.

“Open!” Ning shot out a streak of sword-light. Slash! It swept out like a wave, tearing a tunnel through the astral clouds and pushing the specks of light aside.

Whoosh! Ning and Mogg flew forwards at high speeds, using their sword-light and saber-light to continuously carve a path forward for themselves. In the blink of an eye, they flew past the thirty-fifth layer.

“The pressure here is ridiculously strong.” Ning’s face was grim. The spinning astral clouds were like millstones grinding away at them; if they didn’t manage to successfully defend themselves, they would be crushed to pieces! Both had avatar-bodies, but this pressure was still enough to crush them to death. They had to use their sword-arts and Daobirth Essence, respectively, to clear a path through the vortex, but both of them could sense how taxing it had become.

“The dragon turtle is right past the fiftieth layer,” Ning sent mentally, his ‘voice’ tinged with helplessness. “I didn’t imagine that he would be spot on. It’ll be very hard for us to reach the fiftieth layer; even if we do manage to somehow fight our way there, we’d be constantly in danger of succumbing to the crushing power of the vortex. There’s no way we’d be

able to deal with the dragon turtle as well.”

“Agreed. We can’t advance any further. If we do, we won’t have enough power left to fight against the dragon turtle. We might end up dying there.” Autarch Mogg came to the same conclusion.

Although they found the thirty-fifth layer somewhat taxing, they would still be able to unleash 80% of their full power while reserving the rest to keep the power of the vortex in check. There was no need for them to fear the dragon turtle. But if they actually forced themselves to the fiftieth layer, they probably would have less than 10% of their power available for fighting. The dragon turtle would completely dominate them, and they could very well die.

“The pressure here really is terrifying. I can’t believe the two of us working together aren’t even able to make it to the fiftieth layer.” Autarch Mogg began to feel anxious. “But the black tower at the center of this vortex is the central nexus of this entire hive. That’s over a hundred layers down! We can’t even approach it, much less destroy it. We aren’t even close to being able to succeed. What should we do?”

“I agree.” Ning’s head hurt as well. Their bodies weren’t tough enough to resist the crushing pressure of the vortex; they had to beat the pressure back with their attacks! Although Ning was somewhat stronger than Mogg, the two even when working together would only barely be able to make it to the fiftieth layer. There was no chance of going all the way.

“The power of the vortex rises gradually, not exponentially. I estimate we would need at least five Autarchs working together in order for us to stand a chance of making it past the hundredth layer,” Autarch Mogg said. “The two of us by ourselves won’t be able to go too far.”

“Even if five Autarch avatars came in, they probably would still find it very difficult to damage that black tower. They’d end up trapped inside, while the Sithe would probably seize this opportunity to launch the war.” Ning frowned. “We’d be in serious trouble.”

It took time to build new avatars. Ning would need years just to create a new avatar if his current one was lost, he would need many more years for

the new one to reach peak battle power.

Once the war began, the Autarchs simply wouldn't have the time needed to create and strengthen new avatars. Wasting even four or five days on this process would result in the situation quickly turning grim.

"Then what should we do?" Autarch Mogg understood the problem as well. "We absolutely have to destroy this hive. If we don't, then it'll drain away more energy while becoming more powerful! Given enough time, it'll weaken the Chaosverse so much that the Sithe will be able to take control over it. We'll be finished, then!"

Ning felt anxious as well. If nearly half of their Autarch-level combatants were trapped here, they would probably lose the war. But if they didn't send in more Autarchs, this hive would continue to drain away energy from the Chaosverse... which would still ultimately result in defeat!

"Let's try and think of another option," Autarch Mogg said.

"There are no other options." Ning shook his head. "I've been analyzing the formations inside this hive the entire time. It has just a single nexus point – the black tower inside that vortex of astral clouds! If we want to destroy the hive, we'll either need to destroy its nexus or have enough power to blast the entire thing apart."

Ning shook his head. "Destroying the entire hive is impossible. It is too powerful. Nothing we can do would even shake it."

Ning and Mogg continued to ponder the question of what they had to do. As for the massive, impregnable dragon turtle, it simply waited within the fiftieth layer. The crushing power of the astral clouds was unable to injure it in the slightest. It lifted up its draconian head, then let out a booming shout: "Haha! I told you, you won't even be able to make it to me, much less wreck the nexus."

It wanted to lure Ning and Mogg closer. They'd have to deal with ever-greater amounts of pressure, giving the void dweller a better chance at killing them.

Ning and Mogg glanced sideways at the dragon turtle, not even

bothering to answer it. The two did rather envy its defensive powers, though. They could at most fight to the fiftieth layer, but the dragon turtle was able to reach that layer with ease by completely ignoring the crushing weight of the vortex. Its body was simply ridiculous! No wonder Ning hadn't been able to do anything to the creature at all.

"Let's calm down first and come up with a plan. We'll have Titanos try and help us come up with something as well. Let's figure out a way to charge past the astral clouds," Ning said.

"I agree. Let's calm down and think. We'll definitely think of something." Mogg tamped down his own nervousness as well. They quickly spread word to the other five Autarchs, and all six of them began to try and devise a way of passing through the vortex of astral clouds.

Chapter 23: Titanos' Solution

An ancient temple was hovering above an island located within the outer perimeter of the Sithelands. There were six figures seated in the lotus position within this ancient temple. They were Autarch Titanos, Autarch Mogg, Autarch Stonerule, Autarch Skyfeeder, Autarch Bolin, and Autarch Ekong. They were here either in person or in avatar form, and they were all seated meditating. In front of Autarch Mogg, there was an illusory image which displayed what was happening within the Annihilation Hive.

“The insides of the hive are completely filled with countless spacetime bubbles which are linked together in an extremely complicated formation.”

Autarch Mogg pointed at the images and explained, “There is a vortex at the very center of the hive, and it holds a total of 106 layers of astral clouds which surround a black tower. The black tower is the energy wellspring for the entire hive. That’s essentially what we’ve managed to discover thus far. Try and help us come up with an idea, everyone.”

“Hm.”

“Got it.” The other five Autarchs all nodded slowly.

Time flowed on. Autarch Skyfeeder’s avatar kept time accelerated at a rate of 500x for the Autarchs, buying them time to slave away at this problem! The Annihilation Hive was constantly devouring energy, after all. The more time they took, the more harm would be done to the Chaosverse.

“No, that won’t work.”

“Anything else?”

“We have to reach the nexus and destroy the black tower if we wish to break the hive apart, but a hundred layers of astral clouds? It’s too hard.”

The Autarchs pondered continuously. Every so often one of them would voice a suggestion, but the others would quickly point out the flaws!

Time passed, one day after another. The Autarchs spent more than three years painstakingly analyzing the problem. Thankfully, the 500x temporal acceleration meant that only two days went past in the outside world.

“What a marvelously constructed weapon.” Autarch Titanos stared at the illusory images in front of him. An illusory black tower took form, followed by a vortex which took control over spacetime to generate an even more powerful sucking effect. This effect resonated across the entire behemoth hive, giving birth to that terrifying force which was devouring everything around the hive.

“I’m far from being a match for the person who was able to create this weapon.” Autarch Titanos shook his head slightly, then murmured: “But if all I have to do is cause some damage, I should be able to do it.”

“Eh?” The other five immediately turned to look at him.

“Titanos, do you have an idea?”

“What did you come up with?” All of them grew excited.

Autarch Titanos had been alive for an extremely long period of time, and he had spent much of it analyzing Sithe weapons. The other five Autarchs held great faith in his abilities in this regard.

“I’m fairly confident in my idea,” Autarch Titanos said, “But I need to enter the hive first and inspect it personally before I can be sure if it would work or not.”

“Titanos, take the route which Darknorth and I used. The two of us will be there to welcome you,” Autarch Mogg said.

.....

Rumble...

The bald Autarch Titanos was staring at the Annihilation Hive from afar, watching as it swallowed and destroyed everything in an extremely wide area around it. Time quickly began to accelerate around him until it reached 100x the rate of normal time. He then waved his finger, causing a black cauldron which was 300 meters long to appear next to him. He then

tossed many precious ingredients into the black cauldron.

Just six days later, a streak of light shot out from inside the black cauldron. It was a white-robed avatar of Autarch Titanos.

“Go on.” This freshly created avatar of Autarch Titanos had just 20% of his true body’s strength. It quickly flew towards the distant Annihilation Hive.

For now, he was just going to use this weak new avatar for exploring the Annihilation Hive. As for his first avatar in the Sithelands, it would begin to weaken now that Autarch Titanos was focusing his energies on maintaining the second avatar, but the weakening was a gradual process. If he didn’t spend too much time maintaining the second avatar and quickly abandoned it to turn his efforts back to his first avatar, the first avatar would quickly reach peak power once more.

The white-robed Titanos dove into the tunnel which Ning and Mogg had entered, flying into the hive. The tunnel was unfathomably dark and deep.

“Titanos.” Two figures hailed him from afar.

“Darknorth. Mogg.” The white-robed Titanos revealed a smile.

“This new avatar of yours is really puny,” Mogg’s avatar said teasingly. “You’d probably get wiped out in an instant if you got into a fight with those Autarch-class void dwellers.”

“It’s just a temporary body. We’re in a rush for time, so I just used a quick and dirty method to get this thing up and running,” the white-robed Titanos said.

The three continued to fly forwards as they chatted together. Ning led the way, warping through spacetime and moving them towards the vortex of astral clouds.

“How beautiful.” Autarch Titanos stared at the astral clouds from afar, an amazed look on his face. He then turned to look at the countless spacetime bubbles off in the distance. “Impressive. Truly impressive. Now that I had the chance to witness these things operating in person, I feel even more admiration towards the Sithe who set this all up. It had to have

been the Sithe Lord of Chaos who personally created this thing. This place's creator is far more talented than I am."

The more accomplished one was in understanding how complicated artifacts and weapons were fashioned, the more one would understand just how incredible this Annihilation Hive was.

"Do you have any ideas?" Ning asked.

"Creation is hard, but destruction is much easier." The white-robed Titanos smiled. "I came up with an idea after quite a long period of pondering, and I'm sure it'll be effective."

"What's the method?" Both Ning and Mogg were excited.

"Don't rush me! I need to make some further improvements." The white-robed Titanos stared intently at the vortex of astral clouds, scrutinizing how it functioned while pondering how to improve his technique further. Of course, it was Autarch Titanos' true body in the outside world which was doing most of the real work.

Six hours went past. Ning and Mogg had been waiting this entire time, and finally they saw a smile appear on the white-robed Titanos' face. "I've finally completed it. Darknorth, I'll teach you the technique. You use it."

"Why don't you teach me instead?" Autarch Mogg's avatar teased.

"You are too weak when it comes to the Dao of Formations. You wouldn't be able to learn it even if I tried to teach you." The white-robed Titanos glanced sideways at Mogg, then looked at Ning: "Darknorth, you are every bit my equal when it comes to formations. The only reason why you weren't able to come up with this idea is because you aren't very experienced in the creation of weapons and artifacts."

"Take a look at this." The white-robed Titanos gently waved a finger, causing an illusion of the black tower to appear before him. "This black tower is the nexus of the entire hive, right?"

Ning and Mogg both nodded. This much, they both knew.

"It is also the energy wellspring for the entire hive," the white-robed

Titanos said. “But merely providing power doesn’t mean that much; its real value lies in how it applies that power! This is why the black tower is covered with countless runes. The energy wellspring uses those runes to form the hundred-layered vortex, causing the swallowing power to be increased dramatically.”

Ning understood this principle. It was akin to using ten percent of your full power to achieve a hundred percent of the effect you desired!

“The vortex, in turn, links with those countless spacetime bubbles to form an enormous formation of even greater power. This formation resonates throughout the entire hive, generating that tremendous sucking power towards the outside world around it,” the white-robed Titanos said.

“In other words, the vortex is an amplifier. The formation employing all those spacetime bubbles is a second amplifier. The way in which the formation resonates with the entire hive is the third amplifier!

“These three amplifiers are the real reason why the black tower’s power has been increased to such an inconceivable level that it can rip away energy from the Chaosverse itself,” the white-robed Titanos said. “If we can disrupt any of the three amplifiers, the hive won’t be able to function properly. Destroying the hive’s structure would accomplish this, as would destroying the black tower or all the spacetime bubbles inside this place.”

Autarch Mogg immediately said, “But we can’t! This hive is a weapon of terrifying power; we aren’t able to even scratch the thing. As for the spacetime bubbles, we were able to destroy some, but new ones would almost instantly be created. As for the vortex, its composed of countless specks of light. There’s nothing to destroy.”

“Hah! You dummy.” The white-robed Titanos glanced at Mogg, then chortled, “It actually isn’t too hard to deal with the hundred-layered vortex. All we need to do is set up an even larger vortex formation around it, one which spins in reverse. My reverse-vortex formation simply needs to weaken the power of the astral clouds vortex. In doing so, it’ll dramatically weaken the effect the hive has on the outside world. Once this happens, it probably won’t be strong enough to plunder energy from

the Chaosverse by force.

“A reverse-vortex formation?” Ning began to understand.

“This is the reverse-vortex formation I came up with. Take a look, Darknorth.” The white-robed Titanos waved a finger, causing an illusory reverse-vortex to suddenly appear around the illusory astral vortex in front of him. This was an inwards-focused formation that pushed back against the astral vortex, weakening its power.

“The vortex of astral clouds is an outwards formation which uses the black tower as its energy source.” Ning smiled. “Our reverse-vortex formation will be an inwards formation which uses me as its energy source. My power comes from the Chaosverse itself and is virtually limitless! I don’t need to completely stop the astral vortex; all I need to do is weaken it by 30%, and it’ll most likely be rendered ineffective.”

“Here are the insights I used to create this formation. Take a close look, Darknorth.” The white-robed Titanos immediately began to explain the finer details regarding the reverse-vortex formation to Ning, who listened attentively. Mogg listened as well, but a mystified look was on his face. In the end, he wasn’t even close to being Ning or Titanos’ equal when it came to formations.

Chapter 24: Gaining Entry

The reverse-vortex formation was unspeakably complicated and profound. Ji Ning's true body in the Three Realms had to spend quite a bit of accelerated time in meditation before truly understanding it.

"Marvelous. Absolutely marvelous!" Ning couldn't stop praising it.

"Haha!" The white-robed Titanos let out a proud laugh. "I wouldn't dare boast about other things, but I'm quite confident in myself when it comes to artifacts. Darknorth, are you now able to set the formation up?"

"I am indeed." Ning nodded.

Mogg's avatar just chuckled to himself. He had also tried to learn it, but had made very little headway.

The white-robed Titanos said, "Then hurry up and use it!"

"Alright." Ning immediately flew over, warping through space to appear in the 'skies' above the vortex of astral clouds.

"Arise!" Ning's face was solemn, and an endless wave of mana energy began to flow out from his body. He was using mana to guide the power of the Dao into creating those formations! Waves of energy rippled through the area above the astral vortex as countless streams of sword-light manifested. It was like a vast world of the sword had appeared, and it quickly began to spread outwards to encompass and cover the entire astral vortex.

The white-robed Titanos and Mogg both watched nervously.

"Now what are they up to?" The dragon turtle raised its head, staring puzzledly from its position on the fiftieth level.

"What are these cultivator Autarchs playing at now? Hmph. Do they think saturating the area with an attack will be enough to disrupt my vortex? How laughable! The Annihilation Hive is almighty Iyerre's proudest creation, and it took him untold years to create it." The black-white haired Exalt Anitya was responsible for watching over the entire hive from the dark room he was in. He muttered confidently to himself,

but he still continued to watch intently.

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The vast world of sword-light covered the entire astral vortex, with Ning using an enormous amount of mana to keep it under control.

“Time for the reverse-vortex formation!” Ning immediately willed the countless streaks of sword-light to become grains of ‘sand’ that began to revolve around him. They first took shape at the outer perimeter, then began to spin inwards! The power of the astral vortex was weakest at the outside, and it was also easiest for the grains of sword-light to infiltrate the outer perimeter. As the enormous vortex of sword-light continued to spin, more grains of sword-light began to take form and seep inwards.

They reached the tenth level... the twentieth level... the thirtieth level...

“Right. That’s the way to do it, to just seep straight through it.” A smile was playing at the corner of Ning’s lips. The reverse-vortex formation didn’t try to overpower the astral vortex; rather, it was overwriting it and disrupting it!

The spokes of a wheel in motion possessed tremendous power, but if you threw a bunch of rubbish into the axel you could gum up the works. The astral vortex seemed to be formless and thus hard to disrupt, but the reverse-vortex formation was similarly formless and simply focused on disruption.

“Success.” Autarch Mogg watched from afar. He could sense how the awesome suctioning power around him was beginning to slowly weaken, and he couldn’t help but smile: “We succeeded.”

“It’s too early to celebrate just yet!” The white-robed Autarch Titanos smiled. “Thus far, the influence is negligible. The behemoth hive is continuing to swallow energy away from our Chaosverse.”

Meanwhile, the dragon turtle stared in amazement at the sight above it. “What in the world?” The vortex of sword-light was continuously expanding in size, spreading out in concentric circles that continuously overlapped the astral clouds. By now, they had nearly penetrated all the

way to the fiftieth level.

Rumble...

The sword-light continued to gently reach deeper and deeper into the astral clouds, moving past the sixtieth level... the seventieth level...

The grains of sword-light were incorporeal. The power of the astral clouds continually ground away at them and destroyed them, but the reverse-vortex formation created even more! Ning's mana energy was truly boundless, and he continued to pour it all into the formation. As more and more grains of sword-light poured into the vortex, it caused the power of the vortex to grow weaker and weaker.

.....

The outside world. The countless tunnels dotting the surface of the realmverse-sized hive were continuing to suck in the energy of the Chaosverse. The prime essences were doing their best to halt the process, but they were unable to do so. This was why that enormous vortex of silver 'light' had appeared in the area around it.

But gradually, the sucking power of the hive began to weaken. The weakening continued until it reached the point where the prime essences of the Chaosverse were finally able to completely halt the process.

The silver vortex outside the hive immediately began to dissipate. Everything went back to normal. The Annihilation Hive's countless tunnels continued to strenuously 'pull' at the surrounding world, but it wasn't able to swallow so much as a single scrap of energy no matter how hard it tried.

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Within the hive. Ning was continuing to maintain the reverse-vortex formation.

Whoosh. Whoosh. The avatars of Titanos and Mogg flew to the area above the astral vortex, moving close to Ning.

"Darknorth, the devouring process outside has come to a complete halt."

The white-robed Titanos was all smiles. “Although the astral vortex still has 60% of its full power, that’s not enough to overpower the prime essences of the Chaosverse. It isn’t able to take any more energy away.”

“Haha...” Ning started to laugh. “After I’ve finished infiltrating the entire astral vortex, it’ll become even weaker.”

Just a short while later, the reverse-vortex formation finally finished seeping through the final layer of the astral vortex. In fact, the grains of sword-light even brushed against the giant black tower. The entire astral vortex was still spinning, but it was now being heavily disrupted and had at most 50% of its original power. This wasn’t nearly enough power for it to continue absorbing energy from the outside world.

Swoosh! Ning, Mogg, and Titanos all quickly flew downwards. Now that the power of the vortex had been so dramatically weakened, passage was much easier as well.

“You actually solved the vortex.” The dragon turtle continued to wait on the fiftieth level, its booming voice filled with disbelief.

“That’s the power of the Dao,” the white-robed Titanos said. “You do not train in the Dao. You would never understand.”

Ning chuckled. “We’ve already solved this vortex, which means the sucking power of the entire hive has just been dramatically weakened. I imagine it is no longer powerful enough to prevent you from leaving! I strongly recommend that you leave right away. We’ll send you outside our Chaosverse, at which point you can flee and find a hiding place far away from here. Don’t let yourself be caught by the Sithe again, and stay away from our war!”

“Leave?” The dragon turtle was startled.

Freedom? Release? Emancipation? It was filled with such joy that it was rather dazed. “Alright!” The dragon turtle finally let out yet another rumble: “And what of my two friends?”

“They’ll stay with us for now. We’ll release them once this war is over,” Ning said. It was unlikely that these Autarch-class void dwellers would be

caught a second time, but it wasn't completely out of the question! The only reason why Ning was willing to let the dragon turtle leave their Chaosverse was because he really had no way of killing it. He wanted to reduce the number of variables which could affect the war.

"Fair enough." The dragon turtle made no further objections. In the end, gaining freedom for itself was already a blessing.

"Once you leave, one of our fellows will come and guide you out," Ning said.

"Then I'm off." The dragon turtle shot off eagerly. Now that the astral vortex was nearly 50% weaker than before its remaining amount of power, while still incredible, it was unable to steal more energy away from the Chaosverse. As for the dragon turtle, this time it was able to fight past the sucking power and continue to fly outwards.

"I see it! I see it! That's the exit!" The dragon turtle flew out of the exit, absolutely delighted. It then turned to look at the enormous hive which it had just exited, as well as the mighty cultivator leader who stood far away from it – Autarch Titanos.

"Follow me. I'll send you outside our Chaosverse," Autarch Titanos said. Now that the vortex had been dealt with, the Annihilation Hive was no longer a threat and there was no need for him to continue watching over it.

The dragon turtle followed him obediently, and the two quickly warped away.

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Ning, Mogg, and the white-robed Titanos continued to fly downwards, moving closer and closer to the heart of the astral vortex. The astral clouds had been dramatically weakened, but progress was still quite difficult.

"You two stay here. I'll try it out alone," Ning said. "The astral vortex is still active, which means I need to keep the reverse-vortex formation active as well. If brought to a halt, the hive will once more begin to

swallow energy away from our Chaosverse. In other words, my avatar needs to stay here until we can come up with a way to destroy that energy wellspring permanently. Only then can we destroy the hive, at which point I'll be free to go."

"Agreed." Mogg and Titanos halted their advance. Titanos was here in the form of a newly-created avatar, while Mogg was significantly weaker than Ning.

"Break!" Ning continued to advance while following a path formed by the sword-light generated by his reverse-vortex formation. Although the destructive power of the astral vortex was great, the broken bits of sword-light continuously reformed around Ning, making passage for him slightly easier.

He continued to advance in three-headed, six-armed form, striking out with all six swords to help carve a path outwards. The deeper he went, the harder it became. In the end, Ning had to use all his power while following the path of sword-light in order to reach the black tower at the very center of the vortex.

Riiiiip! The terrifying crushing power here continuously destroyed the surrounding sword-light, but more grains of sword-light rose in their stead. As for Ning, he also maintained his three-headed, six-armed form to fight back.

"This is the energy wellspring of the entire hive." Ning stared at the countless runes covering the black tower. The runes were profound beyond all imagination. After analyzing them for a while, Ning suddenly leapt forward to ram against the black tower. Right as he hit the tower, he used a blinking technique and followed his senses to teleport inside the tower.

Chapter 25: The War Begins

Castles, planets, towers... Ji Ning was able to penetrate any purely physical barrier, no matter how indestructible it was, with ease.

After blinking into the black tower, Ning could still sense the outside world beyond it. Even his mana was able to easily pass through the tower and continue to maintain the reverse-vortex formation outside.

“Who would’ve thought the insides of the tower would look like this?” Ning rose into the air, staring at the area before him.

The black tower merely covered an area of ten thousand kilometers. At the very center of this area was a shadowy black globe that was covered with a veneer of light. It was furiously gobbling up everything being sent to it. The energy that was circulating towards and through the black tower wasn’t impeded by the tower itself at all, and when the energy was absorbed by the shadowy black orb it caused the orb to slowly grow more powerful.

Time ticked on, minute after minute. Eventually, the shadowy globe finished devouring the remaining vestiges of power which the Annihilation Hive had swallowed, at which point it had nothing to feed upon.

“So this is the energy wellspring of the Annihilation Hive?” Ning nodded slowly. He could sense a strange Dao infused into the black orb, one which was contrary to the Dao of their Chaosverse.

“It emanates a terrifying aura of destruction. There’s no way this destructive power came from our Chaosverse. It must have come from the Infinite Void outside.” Ning was extremely certain of this.

“Break!” Ning was in his three-headed, six-armed form and wielded all six Northmoon swords. Sword-light flashed in a dazzling manner, as though six rainbows suddenly had shot out and simultaneously chopped down upon the black tower. It was the black tower which was allowing this engine of destruction to manifest the great vortex in the outside world. If Ning could destroy the tower, the whirlpool itself would instantly

disintegrate!

BOOM! A series of loud explosions rang out. Ning's sword-light was powerful and dominating, but it only managed to cause the tower to tremble. No actual damage was done.

Ning switched from one sword-art to another, trying them all. He tested a soft and corrosive style, a blazing and concentrated style, and a mixture of many other styles as well. None of his many sword-arts, however, were able to do a thing to the black tower.

"Eh? The black tower is absolutely invulnerable. That means I'll have to turn my attention to the energy wellspring." Ning frowned as he turned to look at the sphere of annihilation.

It was a dark, shadowy, illusory thing that continued to strive to devour the outside world. Ning had the feeling that the destructive Dao it contained was extremely odd, and he had the feeling that breaking it would be extremely difficult.

"I'll give it a shot." Once more, Ning struck out with his swords. Whoosh! The Northmoon swords expanded to become over a thousand meters long as they furiously chopped down towards the shadowy black orb.

Bam! When the swords chopped down on the black orb, they instantly sensed a power pushing back against them. The surface of the shadowy black orb trembled and changed slightly, but once Ning withdrew his swords it quickly went back to normal.

"Break! Break! BREAK!" Ning tried out multiple sword-arts, sending countless streams of sword-light crashing down upon the shadowy black orb. Each time it shuddered and distorted in shape, but every time it quickly regenerated and once more appeared completely undamaged.

"I'm not strong enough. This sphere of annihilation is completely capable of enduring the force of my sword-arts. I can't truly damage it at all! I can only make it collapse once my attacks surpass its limits." Ning shook his head. "The Sithe Lord of Chaos truly is incredible. He's able to manipulate this sphere of annihilation as though it was a mere bauble and

even figured out how to teleport it into our Chaosverse. I, however, am not able to budge it in the slightest, much less damage it.”

If he wasn't able to break the sphere of annihilation, the only thing he could do was keep his avatar here and maintain the reverse-vortex formation indefinitely.

“The Dao within this sphere of annihilation is truly inscrutable.” Ning glanced at the shadowy black sphere, seemingly capable of devouring all things, then once more reached out with his senses to try and understand the laws it contained.

“This Dao is completely different from the Daos of our Chaosverse. Perhaps... perhaps I'll be able to study its Dao and create a brand new Sword Dao from it!” Ning suddenly was inspired by it. He had once created an Annihilation Sword Dao during his six million chaos cycles in training! That Dao was a purely destructive Dao, but this ‘sphere of annihilation’ was different; instead of simply destroying, it devoured everything around it.

The Five Elements, Yin and Yang, darkness and light... it could swallow literally everything the Chaosverse held, then use it to strengthen itself! This was a strange yet terrifyingly powerful Dao! Ning had the feeling that if he could figure out how to infuse it into his own Sword Dao, it would probably produce an extremely powerful Sword Dao that would be of great benefit to him.

The black tower was impregnable, while the sphere of annihilation was similarly invulnerable. The Autarchs had no ideas either, and so Ning was forced to leave his avatar here! It was better for them to keep an Autarch-class combatant tied up here than to allow the Annihilation Hive to continue its devouring rampage.

Ning's avatar spent all of its time staring at the sphere of annihilation, attuning to the powerful destructive forces within it.

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In a dark part of the Chaosverse. Autarch Titanos and the dragon turtle suddenly appeared out of nowhere and appeared here.

“All the various different spacetime continuums are interlaced together here. We have reached the farthest reaches of our Chaosverse,” Autarch Titanos said. Nothing was beyond this place save for endless darkness. If one continued to fly, one still wouldn’t see a true ‘barrier’ signifying the end of the Chaosverse.

The borders of the Chaosverse could not be seen with the naked eye or sensed directly. It was simply a place where many different spacetime continuums were jumbled together. Only someone of Autarch Titanos’ caliber would be able to verify where it all came together. There were actually countless nexus points like this, and all of them together formed the vast, impregnable ‘line’ which separated the Chaosverse from the Infinite Void!

“I’ll send you out,” Autarch Titanos said.

“Thank you, Autarch.” The dragon turtle was very delighted and chose to express it through great modesty.

Autarch Titanos waved a single finger. Slash! He tore through the darkness before him as though it was parchment, revealing a dazzling scene ‘outside’...

This was the beautiful and stunning Infinite Void, a place filled with countless colors. It was truly vast without end and filled with countless celestial bodies, with the Chaosverses merely being the largest and most mysterious of those bodies. It was composed of countless different intersecting spacetime continuums. Anyone could quickly become lost when traversing them.

“The Infinite Void.” The dragon turtle grew excited. Finally. It was finally going home!

“Go. Hide in a distant place and don’t let the Sithe catch you again,” Autarch Titanos said.

The dragon turtle gave Autarch Titanos a grateful nod, then sent its massive bulk hurtling through the great rift within the darkness and into the vast Infinite Void outside. This was its true home, the place it loved. It was vast beyond measure and filled with infinite possibilities and marvels.

When Autarch Titanos glanced at the dazzling lights and sights of the Infinite Void, he couldn't help but feel a hint of desire as well. He very much wanted to go out and do some adventuring, but his Chaosverse was in grave danger. Their Chaosverse didn't even have a Lord of Chaos to defend it. How could he be so selfish as to go out exploring at a time like this?

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Within a vast palace of light. Almighty Iyerre was seated on a throne up high, barefoot as always. He was dressed in gray robes which covered his muscular frame, and his eyes were filled with warmth as he stared downwards at his subjects. Before him was a teeming mass of servants, all of them Exalts.

"The Annihilation Hive has already been solved by the cultivators," Iyerre said slowly as he gazed at his servants.

Instantly, there was a commotion amongst the many Sithe Exalts.

"I underestimated those cultivators." Iyerre smiled. "I had thought that I might be able to gain victory through the Annihilation Hive alone! Now, it seems that taking control over this Chaosverse won't be as easy as I had hoped. Very well then. Since the simplest method has failed... let us go to war! Let the final war begin."

All of the Exalts raised their heads to stare at the almighty Iyerre. They felt nervousness, anticipation, excitement, and fear.

Had it finally begun? The final war?

"Last time was just a trial run! This time, we'll fight for real! The local cultivators have managed to produce a complete Eternal Omega Sword Dao, which means they are going to become increasingly powerful. Eventually, they'll give birth to Omega Emperors! The longer we wait, the slimmer our chances shall become."

"There's no way out. Let the final battle begin! If we win, you shall all gain your freedom and receive countless gifts from me for having aided me," Iyerre said. "If we fail, all of you shall fall."

By now, Iyerre's smile had vanished. A terrifying, shocking light began to emit from his eyes. All of the Exalts below him could sense his terrifying will and resolve. "Now go! The final war starts now!" Iyerre commanded.

"Understood!" Frenzied looks appeared in the eyes of all the Exalts. Fear was meaningless at a time like this. All they could do was prepare to fight! If they won, they would have everything they could ever dream of... and in fact, the new Chaoslord Iyerre would give them more than they could even imagine!

All of the Exalts departed, leaving Iyerre seated by himself atop his throne within the palace of light.

Iyerre was smiling again. He murmured softly to himself, "Cultivators, I already know every trick you possess! You, however, have no idea what I am capable of. The war starts today. I wonder, cultivators... how long will you be able to hold out for?"

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